



The Autobiography of
AN ORANGE SELLER

Eric Ikogho

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The characters in this book are not real, and the names
bear no resemblance of actual persons
dead or alive.

Dedication

To Edesiri

The story of a ghetto kid and the lucky circumstances that helped him find a place in the scheme of things.



The Beginning

They ran in all directions, clutching ice cream cones and plastic bottles of soft drinks. Though looking grubby with stained clothes, as biscuits and cake crumbs plastered their faces and littered everywhere, there was happiness and excitement written all over the faces of these children. The sounds were joyous, reflecting the season and the attendant expectations from these happy kids.

The parking lot was filled with exotic cars. They were mostly jeeps and sports utility vehicles (SUVs), and a good collection of Infinity models of jeeps. There were a few Hummer jeeps, reflecting the heights of the affluent in the society. Even motorbikes were parked there. In this season, no one was going to be left out. Children were children, and no one knew the rich, poor or homeless. The atmosphere was colourful with a touch of red adorning the spacious hall. Why not? It was Christmas.

The weather was splendid. Blue skies almost laughed aloud in appreciation of the season, and the sun was friendly, emitting low heat as if to complement the soft winds that whispered Christmas carols. The traditional harmattan season was not yet in sight although severe storms of dry and scorching weather filled Weather Reports on television screens in the northern parts of the country. This was Benin, and we were enjoying the best from the heavens of God.

The trees even acknowledged the beauty of the season, and displayed colours with their leaves, similar to the spring season in far away lands. Traditionally the streets of Benin were lined with children clad in colourful clothes walking in groups, with the bigger children leading the way and shielding the smaller ones from the menacing traffic. There were drunken drivers and excited children driving Papas' cars to contend with. The blaring horns and big boys waving flags out of car doors added to the

beauty on the roads.

“Wake up,” came a loud voice almost like a scream within my ear. It was Staffy. He had been observing my mood for sometime now, and suspected I was on memory lane.

“Wake up,” he said again. “We have ordered ice cream for you,” he continued, observing me as I looked at the happy kids.

Staffy knew me well. He was a childhood friend and we made our discoveries together. We attended the same secondary school, and spent our holidays together in the same neighbourhood. He was not just a friend; Staffy was considered a member of our family. He was like a blood relation of mine. His mother was my mother, and my mother regarded him as her son. Only Staffy could have known I was remembering my childhood. He could read my mind like a book. He knew my moods. Staffy was preparing to go to the United States of America. He had a sports scholarship. He could easily have been the author of this book. We were on a date and were expecting our dates to join us. We had to be discreet. The girls did not want to be seen leaving with us.

“Wake up,” he said shaking his head.

“It’s their time. Ours was different.”

The fast food place was new in town, and well furnished, with a generous stock of pastries, chicken, fried rice and almost any delicacy you could find in an expensive restaurant. I stared at the ice cream cup in front of me with disapproval. It was strawberry ice cream. I was not disposed to any other type of ice cream except the all white one. That was the one I knew. It was called vanilla now. I was not particularly used to taking ice cream, not until now. I never tasted ice cream until I was well over 23 years old. It was fun.

Just then Imuetiyan began to cry. Clad in an oversized pair of trousers and long-sleeved dress popularly called *buba* and *sokoto*, a native dress popularized by the Yorubas in the western region of Nigeria, Imuetiyan became loud as he cried, desperate for the attention of his mother. He wore a red plastic wristwatch and blue plastic sunglasses. Imuetiyan wore plastic shoes, and protested the unequal treatment he was getting from his mother. He had been denied a packet of fruit juice, despite the fact that his elder sister was sipping away at hers and would not let go.

He wanted his.

"I nor blame you," snorted his mother in Pidgin English. "Your papa nor fit buy ordinary garri for house for Christmas. 'I want juice'," she said, mimicking her son. "Where you think say I go get money from?" she queried in a rather loud voice shoving Imuetiyan through the front door as they hurried out of the restaurant.

I knew Imuetiyan's mum very well. They lived a few blocks from my house at Evbuoriararia Quarters. She was a saleswoman in a local restaurant run by an elderly lady. Her husband was a bricklayer and hung around the marketplace looking for work from the local contractors who went there to hire freelance artisans. A Christian, Madame Angela, as she was popularly called in the area, was well known. She was a very loud neighbour and spared no words in telling everyone how lazy and wretched her husband was. She was bulky, and could wrestle anyone who dared cross her path. Almost every woman in the neighbourhood had had a taste of her rain of abuses. It was even dangerous to exchange greetings with her in a public place like this. I had to put up a face of deep meditation to escape her eyes. It was the safest thing to do.

"I know that woman," I said to Staffy. "Iron Lady. She lives close to my house."

She reminded me of my mother. Mama was a hard-working woman. A woman of great virtue, Mama was a 'native village' woman, uneducated. She could not speak Pidgin English and spoke Urhobo to us. We spoke English, determined to make her like other mothers. Our friends' mothers spoke in English and were presentable. She never cared about the 'whiteman's' language. She was content with her native tongue and only managed a few words of bad Pidgin English if she had to communicate with a customer.

Papa had brought Mama to Warri where they settled after having my elder brother in the village. I was born in Warri, the second child of my parents. Papa decided to relocate to Warri to start a new life. Life in our native town Okpara Inland was not favourable to him. He was now a cocoa farmer. It was a good trade, and Papa was able to meet our basic educational needs with the proceeds of his new trade. Mama had no training in any

profession and became a petty trader. She sold cooked food by the waterside. She sold starch and 'owo' an Urhobo delicacy prepared with fresh palm oil seeds. It was quite popular with the local sawmillers who clustered on the waterfront of the Warri River.

Mama was enterprising and as soon as I was old enough I became her partner. I was in charge of the mobile trade department. I was a hawker. I started as an orange seller. It was the season, and I had not started school. All hands were on deck to put food on the table. My elder brother helped Papa with the cocoa trade. He helped with the processing of cocoa beans from the fresh pods. He was versatile at producing sweet fruit juice from cocoa pods.

"Sweet orange. Who go buy orange?" I would scream in my almost inaudible voice. "Fine orange."

The total value of the oranges in my tray was less than 1 shilling. It was enough to occupy my entire day. I was good at my trade, and Mama always relied on me to bring back money for the evening meals. I always sold all my wares. My younger brother was a toddler. Sometimes I had to skip market to look after him at home while Mama went to market and Papa went to McIver, the local produce store, to sell his bags of cocoa.

I built my own toys. Bamboo sticks and empty milk cans were raw materials. I built cars and trains, complete with steering. I was a major supplier of toys to my kid brother. I was three years older than him.

I sold whatever was in season. My favourite was groundnuts. "Sweet groundnut, who go buy groundnut?" I would call out to the sawmillers. It was also popular amongst school pupils. They used groundnuts to complement garri soaked in water with salt. It was a delicacy to combine both. I always took a small bag of garri with me to my business places. I had to have lunch.

Mama measured the number of cups in my showglass. I was expected to make returns according to the number of cups in my showglass, but I always found a way to accommodate lunch. I also tucked away a good profit. Mama always got something slightly less than calculated, but there was profit for her. The excuses came easy.

"The groundnut spoil. Sun make the showglass hot," I would

explain, “many cups were rejected by customers.”

“I fall for Gedu Waterside. The groundnut troway”

“Them beat me take my money.”

“Rain nor let me sell well well today.”

The stories sustained my little business schemes and I was assured of market the next day. I guaranteed myself a 3 pence saving. It was business. Mama had confidence in my ability. I was her salesboy, a good boy, hardworking. I only saved money for Christmas. Mama never went out of her way to empower us. We had to extract the money from her skilfully. Papa empowered us. He always had money-making incentives for us.

Christmas shopping for us was restricted to *buba* and *sokoto* like Imuetiyan. Usually cheap prints produced for the Nigerian market by the colonial masters. We were responsible for all other items of clothing. We bought used imported underwear to wear under the outfits, plastic wristwatches, and coloured sunglasses. If we worked hard enough, we could wear rubber shoes. It was quite an effort getting well dressed. Imuetiyan was the picture we presented as small kids. We never indulged in luxuries like ice cream. Our sweets came from the North, from the Hausa/Fulanis who brought ‘white taffy’ made out of sugarcane juice. It was sweet.

Papa was a disciplinarian, but loved his children dearly. Papa had been a brilliant child himself. He finished standard six in grand style, and was employed to work in the Catholic Mission in his native village of Okpara Inland Town in Ethiopie East Local Government Area of Delta State. He aspired to go to college, but had no means to do this. He worked for one Father Hamilton. Papa was so clever that he became a teaching assistant in the local Catholic school in Okpara Inland. Papa cherished Western education. He wanted to work for the government as a clerk. In his spare time he tapped rubber. That gave him extra money. Papa earned 6 pence monthly from his job in the mission. He was a Catholic and would not contest any salary given to him.

Papa was determined to be educated, and if he couldn’t, then he would train his children or family members who would make the family proud. At this time, families aspired to have lawyers and doctors in their fold. It showed affluence and brought a lot of respect to the families. Papa decided to sponsor his younger

unmarried brother to school.

Papa concentrated all his efforts on his younger brother's education. We were still not of school age. Education was free for primary school pupils. We were under the Western Nigeria Government in the colonial days, and it practically cost nothing to send us to school. Secondary school was expensive. He was just a cocoa farmer. We made sure he was successful in his trade. We always assisted him select the bad cocoa beans from the bags to pass the grading test. The white men in khaki with steel helmets wore magnifying glasses as spectacles and nothing passed their eyes unnoticed. Grade 3 produce attracted about half the price of grade 1 produce. It took extra efforts to get the bags to the grade 1 standard, and we were there to ensure this. The reward was good.

"My boy, you must work for your upkeep," he would say as we scattered the beans, selecting the bad ones.

Lunch break was a sight to behold. Papa would take us to the local waterside food shed. The meal was standard. *Eba* and bitter leaf soup. Mama Kelechi was an Ibo-Warri woman. She cooked delicious meals. Any meal was delicious for us. We were only privileged to eat three types of soup. They were Urhobo soups. *Eba* was our staple.

"Eat meat, my son," he always announced. I would have two large pieces of meat all to myself, apart from the many lumps of stockfish tucked at the edge of my lumps of *eba* as I explored fertile areas of the soup bowl. Papa loved the sparkle in our eyes as we ate with him. Sometimes he would allow us devour all the pieces of meat in the soup.

The situation was the direct opposite when we ate at home. Sprawled around the large bowl of *eba* and soup in a circle during meals, each of us would have secured fractions of a piece of meat in our left palms, shared according to our ages. We never got beyond the quarter of a small sized piece of meat. We could not challenge our older brother. He would beat us for challenging him. Eating with Papa was a whole new experience, and it gave us joy. Sometimes we left him with gifts from him and some of his friends.

We also made money helping him upgrade his farm produce. We were responsible for our own Christmas apparels. By October

1, we would have made enough money to secure white canvas shoes and a matching pair of socks to go with it. Mama was responsible for securing the dress, and it was quite an ordeal.

We would give notice on our demands for a Christmas dress early November, reminding Mama every two weeks. "Mama, you go buy Christmas dress for me o," she never bothered to answer.

"Mama, I nor go gree o, you must buy Christmas dress for me."

"*Me korigho na?* Do I harvest money from trees?" she would snap if we became persistent.

She hadn't heard the last of our demands. In December, we would go on complete hunger strike. The strike usually continued. We would look untidy and hungry, and would reject food. Usually when Mama went to the market we would crack palm kernel nuts and have our fill eating soaked garri with kernel nuts. When Mama got scared, materials for our Christmas dresses would accompany her from the market. Auntie Poko sold clothing materials in the market. She was Mama's maternal cousin. She had her stall close to Mama's shed. Sometimes we wondered why she never voluntarily gave us materials. Mama had to buy from her.

Late Christmas

The memories of Christmas were unending. Uncle Thomas was reeling away on his *Singer* foot sewing machine on Christmas day when we approached him to demand for our Christmas clothes. Uncle Thomas was Papa's cousin. He was a close relative, and we regarded him as our grand uncle. My younger brother was my best friend and we usually plotted our Christmas escapades together. We had acquired all the accessories for our dressing this Christmas and had come to claim the dress. It meant the whole world to us.

Christmas day was the time to eat rice. It was a rice day. We ate rice 3 times every year; at Easter, at Christmas, and then the New Year. The earlier we set out the more chances we had to record full tummies. We could consume six adult rations of rice down our little pot bellies. We also had the fat chance of gulping a few bottles of *King Krola*, the 'whiteman's' drink that bears resemblance with the *Coca Cola* of today. We were full of

expectations. The weather was just right, and the atmosphere smelt of Christmas.

We were not at the bottom of the social ladder. At least Papa ensured we went out for Christmas. He allowed us to go. My agemate in the next street, Goddy, was not too fortunate, and he would make do with entertaining guests from house to house, collecting tips as much as he could. We had Christmas clothes and we were about to collect them.

"Migwo, ose ri Dennis," we greeted Uncle Thomas in our traditional language. "We are on our knees, the father of Dennis." Dennis was his son. We were agemates, and sometimes played together.

"We come collect our dress. Mama say make you give us our dress."

"Don't worry me," he snorted as he continued pedalling without even looking up to regard our sullen faces. To our amazement, the print fabric for our clothes were still in the wraps Mama had used to deliver them to Uncle Thomas three weeks back. He was a family member and Mama was sure he would give her children's clothes top priority.

The chorus was spontaneous as we wailed on seeing the Christmas day outing slip away before our very eyes. Our cries must have been louder than cries at a funeral service, but it did nothing to Uncle Thomas. He was adamant. We were disturbing him. After all he also had a right to Christmas.

"We beg now, sew our dress," we pleaded in one voice.

"We beg, Sir," we pleaded passionately with our father's cousin. He never cared. It was unbelievable, and even as I write now my heart bleeds with the pain I felt on that Christmas day.

Just then Dennis and his sister came to bid their father farewell. They were going out for their Christmas routine. Uncle Thomas's house was usually one of our destinations on Christmas day. He always gave us six pence each, and always had a generous supply of *Krola*. His shop was in front of his house. Dennis was heading for our house. Mama usually gave them rice and money. We were in the middle of nowhere.

Uncle Thomas certainly had a style with his choice of attire for his children. Clad in smart lined trousers, and long-sleeved shirts, complete with cowboy hats and toy pistols, his son was a

pleasant sight to behold. His sister was dressed like a little bride and clutched a handbag. She was fat and dark. Uncle Thomas certainly belonged to the class of sophisticated people. He was widely travelled. As they vanished into the streets, we began to roll in the mud. We made a nasty scene, and Uncle Thomas had no choice but to start cutting our materials. It was going to give him a bad name. It was not good for business. He was a popular tailor.

Christmas outing for us started at 5.30pm. We were miserable. We only had time for one visit to an uncle who had just returned from the village. He had gone there with his family for the Christmas and only returned to take care of some pressing business at home. He did not cook rice at home and gave us three pence each for the Christmas. We spent only 5 minutes. He was going out. The memory of the botched Christmas lingered on, but worse was yet to come.

Mr Tima

Mr Tima lived in our compound. He occupied the last room at the end of the building. There were four buildings forming a square in our compound. A fifth building in the middle of the compound housed small rooms designated as kitchens. Every room had a kitchen in this block. A 6th building at the edge of the 4th building housed the bathrooms and toilets called latrines. This was an open toilet in which buckets were used to collect faeces. At night, night-soil men came to evacuate the buckets. We usually teased them. They were called 'Onyoburu', meaning 'the one who carries faeces'.

Mr Tima lived close to the toilet block. He was a middle-aged man in his early thirties and was not married at that time. He was a modern man and always dressed neatly. There was a door separating the block where he lived from the rest of the compound. The key usually hung on the wall near Mr Tima's door. He was a teacher, and attended the Local Kingdom Church in Igbudu. It was far away. He was hardly home, and spent a great deal of time outside the compound. Mama lived in the adjacent block, and occupied one room. Papa lived in the next room to Mama. There was a corridor outside, connecting all the rooms. The

building faced the kitchen block.

Mr Tima was different from my parents. He was a Christian, while Mama did not go to church. She served her local goddess and was a high priestess. Papa was also not a churchgoer. I was a little boy, considered a well-behaved lad.

“Go and stay with Mr Tima,” was the shocking announcement as I woke up one morning. I usually woke up late unless it was my turn to wash the plates.

“You go stay with Mr Tima,” my father said, considering me closely.

“Mr Tima na teacher. E go teach you how to enter school,” Papa said explaining why I was being sent away. I was not to feel unwanted. But I did.

I must have cried for a whole week as I considered all the freedom and warmth my father showered on me. Had I done something wrong? I was on my best behaviour in the days to come. I was sure Papa would change his mind. It was Mama who told Papa I would be a better person if I stayed with someone else for a while. I was being assigned to live with Mr Tima and serve him as a househelp. Was I being rejected by my parents and being sold to slavery? The likely change in my status quo frightened me. I was leaving my home for another. It didn't matter the location. It was another home.

Mr Tima was a strict disciplinarian. Rules were handed over to me, and there was no play time in my schedules. I was either washing, cleaning or sweeping. There were no rewards for hard work. I liked his house. There was a radio there and I sometimes listened to music. We had none in Papa's house.

Mr Tima did not use the community kitchen. He had a kerosene stove which was pumped like a small camping gas. I had undergone special training to use this piece of wonder gadget, and I showed off in the compound. I was not allowed to be with my younger or elder brother. I was not allowed to visit. I was another person. I did not care about this. I slept on a sofa in Mr Tima's house, not on the floor. I was a mini European kid. Our diet sometimes contained baked beans and rice. Mr Tima was a modern teacher. He had been approached to polish me enough to start school.

The rehearsals were intense. Almost every day I would go over

the routine. Shorten your neck, and bend your head. Your hands must touch your ears over your head. That was the eligibility for admission into primary school. With this Mr Tima could get me into a school.

December was a wonderful month for me. Behold! Mr Tima did not celebrate Christmas. He did not believe Christ was born on that day. Once he told me Christ was born in October. He did not expect me to understand the scriptures. I was not that literate. I hadn't gone to a formal school and I could not read or write. The Bible was definitely out of my reach. It meant nothing to me at that time.

Mr Tima usually went on tours for long periods and I was always alone feeding myself fat. He was generous with food. I could make myself any meal. I could cook. At Christmas I would go out with my brother I thought, not until I discovered Mama bought only two materials for Christmas clothes that year. One for Okpako and one for Godwin. Godwin was the youngest in the family, he was a year old, and Okpako had replaced me in the house. Was I no longer Mama's son? I was devastated. It seemed I was now someone else's property now.

On Christmas day, Mr Tima was at home. We did not eat rice. We never went out for Christmas Eve celebrations. I never wore clothes. I was at home. I was determined to run away. This was the last straw. It was my first Christmas in my new home.

As I sat in the fast food house with Staffy, I almost said a prayer for Mr Tima. He taught me detachment from the celebration of seasons. I knew what the children felt as they ran around in circles. They were celebrating Christmas.

The following year, Mr Tima was transferred out of Warri. I did not go with him, although he wanted me to. Papa had achieved his main objective. I was now domesticated. I could take care of myself, brush my teeth with chewing sticks, and wear clothes. I was no longer the perpetually naked boy. I now had some polish.

I loved Godwin. He was the fourth child after Okpako my immediate younger brother. He was bow-legged and talked a lot. Godwin asked many questions. I never knew the answers, but we always talked. He was my favourite brother, and I stayed more at home looking after him.

I had learnt how to make bamboo cages for birds and it was

a hobby. Godwin would sit around me while I constructed the cages. I was a master craftsman. My designs were great, some were multistorey buildings. The top layer usually contained the trap for attracting birds into the cages. The road to the Warri General Hospital went through the Government Reservation Area. There were many dogs, belonging to white settlers. As we passed, we would set our cages, waiting for birds to feed from our traps. I usually caught a handful. Sometimes we roasted the birds. They were like small chicken and were delicious. I made some money from sales of birds.

One day, Godwin was playing with bamboo sticks. I was putting finishing touches to my design. The weather was warm. I was also looking after the cocoa seeds spread out on the elevated mats to dry. As my eyes turned to observe the cocoa beans, I heard strange movements around. It was Godwin.

Godwin began to stretch. His eyeballs rolled back showing the whites. He was looking passionately at me, as if pleading for help. I screamed, and became hysterical.

“Make una come o,” I raised an alarm.

The compound people gathered around Godwin, and administered first aid. As if Mama was aware of Godwin’s plight she came home early from the market. She rushed Godwin home for treatment. The village was the place to get medical health. I cried as they left for the village. My best friend was in some form of distress and I could do nothing about his condition. Papa was not at home that day. He had gone to gather cocoa beans from his farm in the village and buy produce from other farmers. That was the season for harvesting and the commodity was available in large quantities. I was restless and my thoughts went wild. Godwin was in pain I thought although he did not cry.

There was an uneasy calm about me that night. We were alone, and my brother was busy with his studies. He was in the nearby primary school and his examinations were in progress. Okpako and I slept on Papa’s bed that night. I awoke in the early hours of the morning. I felt the soft touch of my dear brother. He was around and for a brief moment I thought Mama had brought him back. As I reached out to hug him I discovered it was Okpako. It must have been a dream I thought. I could not sleep for the rest of the night. Godwin’s presence was strong all night.

The next day, Mama showed up. I was sitting on the same spot putting finishing touches to my bamboo cage.

“Mama, where Godwin?” I asked rushing to meet her.

Mama was silent. She had come home from the village without Godwin. She passed by without saying a word. It seemed she was deliberately avoiding me at that time and busied herself trying to rush to the market. It was rather unusual I thought for Mama to come home without any news of my sick brother she had taken to the village and not tell me how he was. I was looking after him when she was away at the market. How could she be in such a great hurry to meet up with market that morning? It was late morning. Normally she could still catch up with sales that day. The sawmillers loved her food and it would have seemed she did not want to miss the breakfast rush. It usually lasted till early afternoon. But this could not be the case. I suddenly felt a cold soothing wind blow, as if through me. Something was wrong and I could feel my tiny body twitch.

“Mama, where Godwin?” I asked again. “You leave am for Okpara?”

I was looking into Mama’s eyes and waiting for news of my brother’s recovery. Unknown to me tears had assembled on my two tiny swollen eyes. Suddenly she broke down.

“Godwin *wuru*,” she said with uncontrollable grief.

Godwin was dead.



Primary School

The queues were long, and parents scampered all over the place giving last minute instructions to their children. There were no alternatives. The missionary schools were more favoured than the government schools. The atmosphere was tense and rowdy. Children wore their best clothes and mothers were on hand to encourage them with gifts of sweets. Not for me. Mama was getting impatient. She had to go to the market. She usually sold quite a lot to the strong sawmillers who arrived early and had no time for home cooking. Many of them were migrants from the neighbouring communities, and had almost all their meals at the workplace. Mama had a few customers.

“Shorten your neck and bend your head well before you touch your ears,” were her clear instructions.

I had practised this several times, and I now knew the routine. Clad in my Christmas dress of two years, I could pass for a smart boy with good parenting. The headmaster was personally in attendance, and spoke in Pidgin English. There were no nursery schools and only children who had come from foreign lands spoke English. I was barefooted, small and wise. I had learned quite a lot from my playmates in our compound who had had experiences in this field.

We lived a few blocks away from the school, and I knew some of the school teachers. I had sold groundnut, buns and oranges to a few of them. I was very considerate and generous. They had more for their money’s worth when buying from me. I was in familiar territory, and when my mother gave her last minute instructions preparatory to leave, I was not scared. I was in school.

“How many years you be?” the Headmaster asked, writing

down information as we took our turns for the eligibility tests.

“My papa say I be 6 years,” was my reply, keeping a strong and straight face to avoid being caught lying. Though I was about 8 years old, I could pass for 4, tiny and malnourished, barely 2ft 6ins tall. I was a small lad. I was just shortening and bending my neck when he said, “Next!” He had finished with me. I was admitted.

The Christ African Church Cathedral was big. Coloured glass windows adorned the large openings on the walls, and many long benches provided seats for worshippers. I was not a member of the Christ African Church. I was not a churchgoer. Never went to church. I always admired children as they dressed gaily every Sunday to go to church with their parents. Not us. Sundays were spent playing and washing clothes. It was always the best time to dry cocoa beans and make cocoa fruit drink. We were noted for this.

Mama was a traditional worshipper. She had her own beliefs, and we were with her all the time. Her services were full of feasting and dancing to the river front to offer sacrifices to the gods. Mama believed in what she was doing. It helped her with her trade and health. Papa was also with her, always present at the events and very supportive. I was to learn the secret behind their religious beliefs. We were never brought into it. We were never introduced to any religion. Evangelism did not exist at that time and there was peace in the land. Everyone managed his own affairs, either at home or in the church where he worshipped.

We all sat in the church. It was the first time I was entering a church. I was happy. The Headmaster addressed us. We were allocated to classes. The junior primary had their classes in the church premises, and I was schooling in church. We were not forced into the African Church, and never experienced any religious persecution. We were just pupils of the African School. It was a great school and we excelled in football. I could play football, but was too little to make any impact in the game. I was a supporter of Goddy, known for his dribbling manoeuvres. Life was good.

Warri was a cosmopolitan town, and we never identified ourselves by our tribes. All tribes shared Warri equally. There were prominent Yoruba families who were employees of the Postal

Services department of the Post and Telecommunications Agency of Nigeria (P & T). The Edo people of Warri were usually Electricity Corporation of Nigeria (ECN) workers. The Warri-Ibos were the blacksmiths, bicycle repairers. The Warri-Hausas sold roast meat and were famous for herbal medicine. Warri-Ijaws were good fishermen. They were usually dark-skinned and beautiful, especially the girls. The Warri-Urhobos traded and were popularly known for garri production. We had all tribes. Warri was a booming commercial centre, and belonged to no one. We were all represented in the class.

Mama Eba, as she was popularly called, was mother. Half a penny was all we needed for a fairly good meal. For a farthing each, we purchased *eba* and a farthing for fish. The more affluent went for rice and snacks. Mama Eba was my hero. Tucked in a conspicuous corner of the school and near the beautiful ixora edge she would display her basins artistically mounting carefully wrapped portions of *eba* to form a pyramid. The size indicated the level of food left for sale that day. I always got the top of the pyramid. I was the little man, and one wrap was all the little man needed for a blessed day.

With controlled indifference, I would glance at the snacks shed with inspiration. A full display of rice, stew and meat in the corner of the school always fired my imagination and left me plotting schemes to get me there. I needed food. I was too little, never had any luxuries, just *eba* and soup. Christmas was a long way to expect a good meal of rice and stew. Now a school boy, rice was now staring at me, and I longed for it.

We usually closed for the day at about 1 pm. I would proceed to the Warri Main Market to sell my wares. Depending on the season, I sold groundnuts, buns, fried plantain chips called 'kpekere' in the Pidgin English language popularly spoken in Warri. I also sold walnuts, sugarcane, and oranges. I was a child-business boy. The proceeds did not go far. Most of the capital and wares were purchased and given to me by Mama, but I always made a good kill. I don't think Mama was actually doing it for any financial gains. She hardly asked me to render proper accounts. She accepted any explanations for low sales I could come up with and I had many reasons for my low sales. I was making my own money. It was usually to make up for the shortfalls

in our Christmas attires. We had to buy under pants, shoes, wristwatches and sunglasses ourselves. I had to be a business boy.

Mama was building a mud house in Igbudu. She had purchased a piece of land from Chief Sam Warri Essi. Chief Essi had his territorial boundaries, and was always in battle with Merogun who manned Merogun Waterside. With Chief Sam Warri Essi, we were safe. He was feared. For some reason the chief was Papa's friend. I had the privilege of entering his palace several times. It was usually in connection with land. Several artefacts adorned his living room, with red cloths everywhere. He was a powerful man. I thought he also had magical powers.

Igbudu juju festivals gave both scare and excitement to us children. It was usually a tense period with rumours of ritual sacrifices, especially at night and everyone stayed close to his family and avoided lonely and dark alleys. You did not go out at night, when it was time for the festival. Igbudu was at the outskirts of the town at that time, and you will have to travel from Warri motor park to get there.

Agbasa juju was another Urhobo festival in the town, in which culture was displayed. Perhaps the most liberal was Okere juju. It was a pleasure to attend. It was always a colourful carnival with bright and colourful costumes. The Itsekiri and Urhobo women, noted for their radiant beauty, displayed grace in their culture and dance. There were masquerades also, but very friendly. They never displayed any psychic wonders, just acrobatics. The songs were beautiful and we all sang the songs during the festivals. I was not able to seize opportunities presented by the festivities to make female acquaintances. It was a time to make new girlfriends at these festivals, but I was too small to indulge. I only observed.

Jaman

We never knew members of our family. It was too dangerous. We never visited our home town and when they visited, we were shielded from them. We were operating a civilized English family. We never knew Jaman.

I came home to a happy scene. Children were running around the house, biscuits in their hands and sweets. They were well

dressed. They all wore new shorts and shirts. They sang nursery rhymes. They were the elite children.

Okpako was standing by the door when I came back. I quickly put down my showglass to join in the spectacle.

“Na wetin dey happen?” I asked Okpako, confused.

“Na Jaman pikin be dis.”

“Jaman?” I queried. I did not know who Jaman was.

Just then a fair-skinned lady walked in. She was elegant, beautiful and wore English clothes. I thought only girls wore skirts and blouses. She wore one. She looked in my direction with a smile. She seemed to know me.

“Eriki,” she called moving toward me.

“Migwo,” the words escaped uncontrollably from my mouth.

“How are you?” she asked in Queen’s English.

I was quiet. I had no idea she was conversing with me. She grinned. She seemed to understand. I did not speak English. We stood affixed to the spot by the door when Mama came back from the market. She greeted Mama.

“Mama, migwo,” she said to my mother.

“Ghana woman,” Mama said, smiling. She was happy to see her. It had been quite a while and they had a lot to catch up on. Mama sent us to do house chores. We had to prepare food for our August visitors. We prepared a big bowl of *eba*. Mama sent Okpako to the local rice seller to buy cooked rice and stew. The children would not eat *eba*. It was dinner, and they never ate *eba* in the evenings.

Papa came home with a man. He looked very much like Papa. He was his brother. His younger brother. The children were his. He had been in Ghana for the past 20 years. He came with his family on holidays. He was rich. Parked outside the house was a lorry. It was his lorry.

Jaman was a trader in Ghana. He traded in gold, and business was good. Gold trinkets adorned his wife’s neck. She was sophisticated. She spoke good English.

“Are these your children?” he asked as he examined us in great detail. We were unlike his children. He had three children, two boys and a girl. We were three brothers.

We stood there scantily dressed except for worn-out pants that half covered our bottoms. It did not take long before Jaman

ordered us out.

“Go and play outside.”

There was moonlight and we usually cherished the clear night skies. We ran off. His children had to go to bed. It was their bed time.

Papa left his room for them. Papa slept in Mama’s room. We slept on the floor in Mama’s room. Papa and Mama talked for a long time. Mama was not too familiar with Jaman, although Jaman knew her. Jaman was papa’s younger brother. He attended Urhobo College, a first grade secondary school in Warri. Papa was responsible for his fees. He did not complete his studies. Just as he prepared to write the Cambridge Examinations he eloped with his girlfriend to Ghana. He wanted to be wealthy. He went in pursuit of greener pastures. Papa was devastated. His dream of a family member becoming a government clerk was dashed.

Jaman protected his children. He considered us too dirty and timid and never allowed us play with his children.

We woke up late. The Jaman children had dressed up. They really looked beautiful. They had bread and tea for breakfast. They ate with their parents. We took our position by the entrance door. Looking at them expectantly, we had our eyes glued on the crumbs of bread and biscuits in their hands.

“Cut for me now,” we begged passionately. We wanted to eat bread with them.

The children were like us. They wanted to play with us. We even looked alike.

“Gerrou,” came a loud voice. Jaman would not hear of any contact between us. It was clear he disliked us. We were living in the Low Income Group bracket and generally classified in the local parlance as LIG.

We sensed there was going to be an outing that day. Papa had ordered us to wash the lorry. We were excited. We played in the small lorry, polishing the body and scrubbing the wheels. We were going to enter a lorry. It was the first time for us. As we scrubbed we were very excited.

“Where are you going?” Jaman screamed as we were about to take turns to climb into the back of the lorry. It was a small lorry, the size of a Toyota Dyna bus. He shoved us out. Mama and Papa went along with them.

“Make una look house. We dey come,” Mama pleaded with us. We could tell she was not too comfortable with the decision not to allow us go.

“Yes, Mama,” we said. We were furious.

As the lorry sped off there was a growing discontent within us. We did not like this uncle. They stayed for about two weeks, and we never played with our cousins. We were not good enough. As they left we felt the joy of returning to our normal lives again. We could now sleep with Papa on the bed or in Mama’s room on the floor. We did not miss them.

School was not eventful. Soon we were given double promotion because of a change in the school system from Standard to Primary. We were catapulted to primary 3. By primary 5, I was getting the hang of studying. Papa had given us tasks we looked forward to achieving.

“If you take 1st for school, you go dey take 9 pence go school. If you take 2nd, na 6 pence you go dey take go school, and if you take 3rd na toro, 3 pence.”

It was a big challenge and a motivation. My friend and usual provider, Kehinde, was spending longer times away, and I was not getting the nourishment from his gifts of corned beef as frequently as I would have loved. I had to take up this offer. I began to study. The prospects of spending 9 pence a day was in itself inspiring, and was worth working for.

When we were going to Primary 5, the battle lines were pretty well drawn. Two brilliant girls from Odion area of Warri always occupied the 2nd, or 3rd positions in class. The 1st position was the exclusive preserve of ThankGod. ThankGod was also an Odion boy. His house was not far from mine. He was brilliant, sturdy and short. ThankGod was the toast of every teacher. At that time I managed to climb into the top 8th position in class. Goddy usually trailed a little behind me. We were like Aki and Pawpaw the usually inseparable pair in the Nigerian Nollywood home video presentations. We also stuck to each other and plotted ways to unseat the mysterious trio. The onus was on me. I could do it.

I suspended my business for a while. Now I was in Primary 5, a senior class. Two boys from Ilesha who sat on the same bench with me inspired me. They were neat, and always copied notes. I never bothered. They had well organized notebooks and textbooks.

I never had. Their uncle was a teacher in the school, transferred from a primary school in Ibadan to Warri, and gave them extra lessons. They were my friends. Soon I began to get organized, and persuaded my father to buy me Lacombe, the standard mathematics book used at that time. I was to study this book from cover to cover. I was good in Arithmetic, and could recite everything at the back of exercise books. I minimized the times I spent playing football. I was determined to earn the 9 pence. The prospects of having full meals, and even saving for Christmas shopping fired me on.

In the first term examinations I was placed 6th.

Papa studied my results carefully.

“Na who take 1st?” he asked.

“Na ThankGod,” I said, expecting him to understand that the position was reserved for him.

“You nor go dey play again,” he said sternly. He was not obviously excited I had come 6th. He wanted more.

“Yes, Papa, I go read my book wel wel.” I was already doing this. I now saw the ease in passing exams.

At the end of the third term, the Headmaster paused as he announced the results for Primary 5. This time in the 3rd position, Eric Ikogho.

Goddy was excited. He knew about the 3 pence offer. It was going to rub off on him also. Goddy lived with his mother and younger brother. His mother was a single parent. Goddy’s father was living about 100 miles away and never cared for them at that time. Goddy never bothered about his father’s attitude toward them. His mother was a petty trader, and Goddy could not afford any luxuries. He never brought money to school. We always ate together.

In 1960, I was now in Primary 6. Top class. The competition was now keen. We were conscious of our efforts to excel. ThankGod was not concerned. I was. Papa answered my questions at home. I had to excel in other subjects: Civics, Current Affairs, Hygiene, and Physical Education (PE) were not my favourite subjects. Papa made sure I could cope with these subjects.

The last exams were the final exam we were to take before the primary 6 Leaving Certificate Examinations. It was always the climax. The results were usually announced in the cathedral.

As we sat, tension was high. I could see ThankGod was as nervous as me. During the exams, I always asked for more extra writing sheets.

“Paper,” I would scream with my hands in the air. It indicated I had exhausted my writing sheets and wanted more. It was a sign I was doing well. Goddy would also ask for more paper. We usually wrote with about the same speed, and exhausted the papers given to us at the same time. Sometimes it was to drive envy through our competitors. It was a way to intimidate them.

After this came the results. All the pupils were called, and four of us were left without positions. The Headmaster paused, as if to consider the new turn of events.

“The 4th position in the class is taken by Miss Omajuwa Etsemiju.”

Omajuwa was an exceptionally brilliant girl. She had never been 4th before, always making the top three in the class. All eyes turned on me. I had beaten Omajuwa in Primary 5. They had expected her to recover. I maintained a straight and tiny face. I was safe at least.

“The third position goes to Nkechi,” the Headmaster said with a smile on his face. Nkechi had been a good girl. She scored equal marks with ThankGod once and was 1st in primary 4. There was a mild stir in the air. Eric was going to be announced 2nd. As the Headmaster paused for a long time, as if examining the results in front of him, I began to move out of the cathedral. I was going to run home to Papa. I was 2nd in class, then the shocker came.

“The 2nd position in the class goes to ThankGod.”

That was the end of the Assembly. My friends disrupted the rest of the announcements.

“Eric don take 1st.”

“Eric don take 1st.”

They chanted as everyone ran in different directions. ThankGod had been beaten by Eric. Small but mighty. It was a day of joy for the little lad. I was 1st in the whole school. I was happy.

Papa was fulfilled.

“Welldone, my son,” he said in Queen’s English. He no longer spoke Pidgin English. His son was the best in the whole school.

“Thank you, Papa,” I said. “I pass ThankGod.”

“I am proud of you, my boy.” Papa always used those words anytime I accomplished a feat.

“Take 2 shillings. Go buy anything wen you like,” he said.

That evening we visited ‘bondi-bondi’ joint.

Bondi-bondi was the acronym for roasted pieces of meat. It was usually presented in a big basin. It tasted like the now popular goat head (isi ewu) found in popular food joints today. Pieces of meat preserved in pepper sauce were as inviting as they were delicious. It was a delicacy. One piece of meat cost a penny, sometimes two for a penny. We picked pieces of meat from the basin. It was usually ready in the early evenings, with small oil lamps lighting up the premises, and bamboo sticks for picking the pieces.

“Dey count am o. Na two I don take o,” we would announce to the Ibo man manning several basins. Usually we would have a mouthful with several pieces.

“Dey look o,” we would always announce to the seller. At the end of the exercise, we would be paying for six instead of fifteen pieces in our satisfied tummies. I was good at this.

We had a feast. I even bought some toys, and we ate rice to our fill. Goddy danced with me through the streets. Paul took part in the celebrations. He smuggled bicycles for us to ride. There was joy everywhere.

Mama did not understand what was happening. She was a stark illiterate, and there was no point explaining to her. She knew I was in primary school, and I had not been sent home from school for any wrongdoing. I was going to finish primary school that year.

By now I considered myself a big boy. I had grown bigger than visits to family friends, collecting Christmas gifts and eating rice. We were now teenagers, and not children. We were the popular boys in the neighbourhood now.

Christmas Eve was a sight to behold. We formed ourselves into war gangs. Daudu boys were quite formidable, but the Okere boys were deadlier. Every crop not harvested before that day was destroyed that evening. The highlight of the evening usually occurred at the close of cinema. I lived near Rex Cinema, and this was my area of operation. We would throw explosives (bangers) at people and watch them run screaming. It was fun

and most people expected this. It was a ritual for the Christmas.

I spent the Christmas that year dancing ‘Ulaga’. Ulaga was an acronym for masquerade. We had local dance groups, and we made more money. We had a prayer song:

Kan ta ba
Aya
Kan tubu
Aya
Ocha luzor Shaba nor chalancha
Aya
Obu gini Meyi Meke nordunma
Aya
Efe nile nine meke nordunma
Aya
Putete Putegoyibo
Aya
Ugo Anamo Ugo Ndoma
Aya.
We always expressed our gratitude in style.
We Thank You; We Thank you
We Thank You Mama God Bless You.
Papa God Bless You.
Asa wanije we de go o
Jenje
Mama we don come o
Jenje
Papa we don come o
Jenje.

The songs were varied. Every area had its own gangs. There were about two gangs from my area. We were the smaller gang. Town unions usually came out with more creative dance groups. There was a tall masquerade called “Nmanwun.” Nmanwun was feared, it was believed to come from the dead. Whenever it was around, we would go into hiding. It ruled the streets. Fierce-looking men with native chalk and clenched teeth usually held this magnificent masquerade in check with ropes. It was considered dangerous.

The girls usually formed their own small groups. Clad in

colourful loincloths and head ties from their mothers they sang sonorously and danced in circles from house to house.

Le le lalapilo
Ailele
Le le lalapilo
Ailolo
Isinamoto kinabia
Ailolo
Isinamoto kinabia
Ailolo.

They were always graceful, displaying womanhood. The Deltans had very graceful dance steps.

We shared our collection equitably. I usually got a little more because I carried the masquerade. I was a good artist, and constructed weird face masks for my act. We usually could not afford grotesque wooden masks sold in the market. We were a small group.

The New Year celebrations were yet another time to make money from dancing, but the celebrations were usually not as tough as Christmas. Christmas was the main celebration, and everyone looked forward to it. We did not celebrate the birth of Jesus, we celebrated food.

After the primary six exams I settled down to attend lessons. Debua's lesson class was the place to be if you wanted to gain admission into a secondary school. That was my destination now.



My Mentor

Kehinde was a teenager in his mid-twenties who lived in the opposite compound to us across the street in Alders Town where we lived. He was an Itsekiri and was considered a big boy around the area. Nobody dared to cross his path, although he was known to be gentle and kind to small boys, and Kehinde liked me. He would come when we were preparing cocoa juice from fresh cocoa pods and have his fill of free drinks. I always made sure I kept some for Kehinde. He loved overnight juice. Kehinde would take me to the local cinema to watch an Indian film. I was inspired by the cowboy films at the local cinema. I would sit on the floor in the front row. I was allowed to. Kehinde was the local hero and did whatever he liked. As his protégé, I was untouchable, and Kehinde would give me three pennies for school the next day. Sitting with confidence and relish I would order rice and stew. Three pence was all I needed to fill my little pot belly.

Kehinde was my mentor. With him I was safe, and the bullies in school knew I was a no-go area. It was easy for me. Mr Tima was a busy man, and hardly stayed at home. I was his houseboy and housekeeper. Mama and Papa slept in separate rooms and no one missed me or needed to keep tabs on me. I was with a disciplinarian, safe and assured of good education. I was free. It did not matter whether there was food or not.

Mr Tima assumed I would seek for food in my parents' apartment when he was away and usually left well washed pots before travelling. Kehinde was always on hand to feed his little boy.

I soon became a regular cinema goer. I always managed to create the time for leisure. And I soon warmed my way into the cinema crew at the local cinema at the end of my street. I could make good graphic representations of cowboys. I had a flair for

fine art and soon became a local artist for Rex Cinema. A few of us were always handy to distribute noticeboards advertising the next film showing in the cinema in strategic locations in town. I would draw a cowboy on a horse. My favourite hero was John Wayne riding on his horse with sporadic shots into the air. I drew pictures on several boards, and the other boys carried them to locations. 7 pence was a lot of money, and we got free tickets through this work. We were part-time staff. I would pretend to fall asleep at home after arranging with my younger brother to open the door for me when I came back from cinema. Most times I was never detected.

As a schoolboy now I was no longer required to hawk on a daily basis, and I only helped my younger brother when Kehinde was not in town. Sometimes he was away on long trips. He was a sailor working on ships. Anytime they docked I had a marvellous time. Dressed in my wrapper around my neck I was the perfect errand boy, and as I lurked around the Warri wharf on Market Road opposite the Wayfarer's Hotel, Kehinde would give me small items I would help him deposit in a hidden place in the hotel premises. I was a petty thief, and I liked it. I usually had good rewards. Sometimes, Kehinde would give me a whole cup of Exeter corned beef, and I would have the meal of my life. Business was good. I went to school with six pence and I was the centre of attraction.

Goddy and Paul my two bosom friends were very well fed from the proceeds of my exploits. Paul was the son of the local washerman who lived in our compound. He was of Ibo extraction. Sturdy and smart, Paul was the local goalkeeper for my street football team. Goddy was the star dribbler. I was too little to play, but I was the local medicine man. With two redneck lizards hunted down with my catapult, tied with a red piece of cloth, I was sure of victory for my street. And we would win; after all who could get past Paul in the goal, and with Goddy's skills with the ball, victory was assured. And it was thanks to the medicine man, not the skills exhibited by the players.

Paul was disciplined and he was a Catholic, always handy to help his father who operated a small laundry business in the area, and repaired broken down bicycles. He was a good bicycle repairer, and was popular in the area for his skills. He owned a

local repair shop at the corner of the adjoining street, and was always generous with letting us ride bicycles. He would let us borrow the bicycle for two hours at the cost of one hour and sometimes for free when his father was away to the Pessu River to wash customers' clothes. Goddy and I would ride to the local convent school field and try out our skills with riding without hands on the handles and sometimes standing on the bicycles. It was a good time. Kehinde liked it too. He was nice to his neighbours, but Goddy had other friends who were bigger boys.

Goddy could smoke cigarettes at the tender age of ten. It was scary.

"Parker, try this. E good." Parker was my nickname in primary school.

"My papa go beat me," was always my reply.

I was too shy and bashful to try big boy stunts, but Goddy was my friend. We always stuck together in school. The change in the system of primary education catapulted us to primary 3 instead of standard II in 1956 and I was unarguably a big boy now. Goddy was an older boy and was more experienced at that time. Papa knew how to reward his children for excellence and always provided incentives to spur us on. Papa would later set targets for me.

Kehinde's travels became rather frequent and he would usually be gone for long days. I looked forward to his return largely because of the goodies he would bring back. But Papa was now an influence in my growing up. He was looking closely at my grades and would not spare the whip if I fell out of line.

A loud noise usually woke me up at midnight. Usually with an unbearable cane. Just when I thought I had gotten away with mischief, Papa would wake me up with a loud whip made of solid cane. You never knew where the cane was kept. You only experienced it peeling through your skin. Papa made sure we were rewarded for good behaviour and smacked us for bad behaviour. He had a specially preserved whip for this, and we never looked forward to it. My only problem was keeping late nights, usually at the cinema. This would normally attract the whip.

Kehinde had given me enough lessons for my freedom. I was now an operative, writing signs for the cinema house for free

entry. I loved the cinema. We neither had a radio, nor a television. There was no television, and the only cinema we saw was brought into town by advertisers who wanted to introduce new products. For a good cowboy movie or Indian film I would risk the punishment. Usually, I would have to secretly knock for my younger brother to open the door for me. We made sure Papa was asleep.

“Where did you go last night?”

“Nowhere,” I would lie. “Papa, I dey for house. I sleep for Mama room.” That was another reason for more whips, speaking Pidgin English.

“Is that what they teach you in school? Pidgin English?”

“No, Papa,” I would plead and offer not to explain any further. I could not speak Queen’s English. “I beg, Papa, I nor go do am again.”

The beating was usually endless and tortuous, but I was getting used to them. The incentives were too tempting to make me mend my ways. After all I was passing my exams, and that was good for Papa.

Night Out With Kehinde

When Kehinde was in town, he usually monopolized my day. I had to be by his side to run the small errands and help conceal the goods he entrusted into my care for preservation. I was now very proficient at this. One day, I accompanied him on a social outing. I was ten.

We entered a compound with many women sitting in front of their rooms on stools. As we paraded the lines of women, Kehinde would make small remarks, as if seeking my approval.

“This one too old.” I just followed not exactly sure of what we were doing. I just followed.

Finally Kehinde greeted one of the women, rather familiarly. “Ngozi, where you go since?”

“I go village go see my mama,” the woman said standing and smiling at Kehinde as she led the way into a single room. I could see they knew each other. I sat outside, not knowing what I was supposed to do.

“Parker, come inside,” Kehinde shouted, reprimanding me for trying to endanger myself by staying outside. The moon shown

over the horizon and the air was filled with excitement and laughter as most people hurried in and out of rooms. There was an endless chatter of excited women, all expecting visitors to call. This was a Harlem, a red-light district.

“Parker, come.”

I entered the room and the lady closed the door behind her. There was an only chair in the room, facing a well made bed with a curtain, separating the bed from the rest of the room. In one corner were pots, plates, and a small kerosene stove, apparently for making meals. The room was dark. The kerosene lamp was beginning to get dim, and I could not see Kehinde as he sat on the bed.

“Doh, small boy,” said the woman with a gentle approving smile. I liked her. She seemed nice.

“Dis na your pikin?” she asked.

“Na my special friend, na me and am dey waka,” Kehinde answered with a rather cracked voice. He showed signs of waiting too long for her. She had to make sure I was secure and safe where I was. Some minor adjustments were made and the chair had to be moved to the end of the small room, I imagined to reduce the noise level.

“No spoil the small pikin o,” she said laughing as she entered behind the curtains.

“I nor get plenty money today o. You go manage one shilling. You know say I be customer.”

“Na so you dey always dey do, every time you nor get money. Which time I go enjoy your money? You nor know say we dey take mereson?” the woman said as I saw her clothes hang over the curtain rails.

“You go do am small small o. You know say you get power o.”

“You sef,” Kehinde laughed.

“Ngozi, na only you I dey like for here. You know say na you dey carry me well.”

There was silence for a few moments, and shouts began to fill the air.

“Small small now, you nor know say e dey pain?” the woman said.

I could hear the sound of heavy breathing and sighs from Kehinde. It was rather a long ordeal and when Kehinde came

from the curtains, he just said to me, "Come make we go."

"Na your mama?" I asked, not sure what the noise was about.

"No," said Kehinde. "Na my friend. We dey do work for the house."

"Which kind work?"

"Small pikin nor dey do the work."

That was enough explanation for me. Kehinde was a good man to me, kind and very generous. I was privileged to have a large portion of roast meat. *Suya*, as it was called, was a delicacy sold by the Hausa men in Warri. I had plenty of it, and spread the joy to my younger brother. I had come from an initiation.

Kehinde taught me a lot. I was his special project. Apart from being a ship worker as I thought at that time, he also hung around the local night club. I was his assistant. He promoted a local magician. He was called Professor 77. Professor 77 was quite skilful. I was his assistant whenever he came to town. My rewards were huge. Sometimes I got clothes he had conjured. Most times my traditional gift of corned beef was the major delight and incentive.

I was the magician's boy. I carried the coffin shaped box around, and when we saw a clearing I would drop the box and attract the crowd. I was responsible for crowd control, and I collected the money invested by the onlookers for the products they were to get out of the magical spells. Professor 77 usually conjured articles ranging from foods, to toys and clothings. He did not double money. He would burn paper in the coffin box, close it and say some incantations.

"Ozingabu."

"Ozingabu yaya," I would echo.

I was his assistant. We never camped in any location where I would be identified by my friends or family. Only Goddy knew our locations.

"When I say go, say go easy," he would say to the crowd. He needed them to be a part of the process.

"Go."

"Go easy!" would be the thunderous roar, expecting a bumper harvest in the box.

There was never any bitterness on the part of the crowd. I believed Professor 77 came from India. I had watched Indian

films where magicians performed, Professor 77 was more.

At night, I would sleep in his hotel, usually under the bed. It was okay. I was used to sleeping on the floor. The floor was bed for me. If I had the misfortune of being discovered, hell broke loose. I was not often discovered because both parents would assume I slept in the other room. I was clever.

I was very comfortable with Professor 77. I ran errands for him and he would always give me tips. Whenever he was in town I had feasts in school, and Goddy wanted to join. He could never make out time.

My Dear Friend

About this time I had a special friend. I never bothered to know his name, or ask him about it. He was just a friend. He was not too dark, and had a cropped beard. He always came to visit me anytime Mama was preparing to close for the day.

Mama was a food seller at the Ogbe-Ijaw market waterside where the loggers operated sawmills. She sold starch and *owo*, an Urhobo traditional food. My visits to the market were not regular. My younger brother was always with her in her food stall together with Obalogun. Obalogun was born after the death of Godwin and was Mama's favourite child. He was taken wherever Mama went. He was the 4th son. He was still a toddler at that time. Mama always had us spaced 3 years apart. We could calculate our ages just by using the recent born. Obalogun was three years old at the time. Whenever we set out to go home, my friend would show up by my side. I was always delighted to see him and usually welcomed him with a smile and the question.

"Where you from come?"

He would always smile and sometimes make a long excuse without actually explaining his origin. He was just a dear friend and I felt comfortable and secured anytime he was around. I always felt he was a family friend until one day when my mother confronted me.

"Amono wo nene tota?" she was asking me who I was talking to.

"See am," I would say pointing to my friend by my side.

"Where am?" would come her strange reply. I always wondered why Mama would be looking for this friend of mine.

After all my friend was always by my side.

My mother was not a Christian. She had her traditional shrine and served a deity she was very fond of. We later learned that was the deity that opened the way for her prosperity, and she believed this deity allowed her have us as children. We never went to church. Papa joined her at the worship services which were usually accompanied with heavy feasting. There would be plenty of biscuits and rice to serve the other white garment worshippers.

Mama was the local priestess, given a lot of respect. As children we were different. We never joined our friends on Sundays to go to church. Sundays were our free days, play days, and we would play football throughout the day. Mama used to rouse everyone up at night when she would start speaking in tongues and receiving instructions from the deity. Usually, it was to avert a calamity from befalling her children or a close relative who was in danger. The prescriptions usually involved collecting herbs to squeeze in water to wash us down. We were always embarrassed, but never had the boldness to refuse participation. It would amount to disobeying Mama, even when we did not belong to or endorse her religion. Mama was Mama.

She would sometimes reward us with gifts or would promise us sweets if we visited her in the market. Faced with the likely chance of washing plates in the food shed, I sometimes declined her offers. Why not? I had Kehinde. I would only go for the chance that I would meet my dear friend.

“HUUUUUUUUU,” I was singing happily one day when Mama suddenly stopped and asked.

“Who are you talking to?”

“My friend,” I said, pointing as usual in the direction of my dear friend. He was also my guide, giving me very useful advice that got me out of trouble always. I loved him dearly. My friend had told me to sing the word HU to stay happy and prevent bullies from getting at me. Whenever I wanted something he told me, I could sing the word HU. I trusted him. He was my dear friend and so I sang HU always. He talked to me in very clear Pidgin English and had a staff he always held. Most times he wore a maroon robe.

“Where am?” my mother asked, looking about me as if afraid.

“You nor dey see am?” I said little realising he had gone. I did

not know the phenomenon of vanishing at that time. He had gone.

My mother was visibly shaken. Perhaps the deity she served had now chosen me for a mission, and she had to stop this. Mama had no intention of producing heirs to her position as priest amongst her children. She never adored her own position. She was uncomfortable with being different from others. In the days to come my friend visited me sparingly. There was trouble in the air.

One day, I got a surprise visit from my dear friend in school. We had just been dismissed from school for the day when he appeared by my side.

“Where you want go?”

“Market.” Kehinde was not in town and there would be nobody at home. Papa was in the produce store and I was not hungry enough to go make some money.

“Market,” I said expecting him to accompany me.

“Play ball with your friends. Goddy will score many goals today.” It sounded fun also, so I stayed back in school to play football.

I got home that evening to meet my younger brother in tears. He had been inscribed with tribal marks by a Hausa medicine man. He had been contracted to put the marks on me to prevent evil spirits from visiting me again. When I was nowhere to be found, Mama thought the marks would do on my younger brother’s face. I narrowly escaped the gift of tribal marks on my face. I was saved by my friend.

After some more visits and another failed attempt to register the tribal marks on me, but with success on my younger brother, my friend suspended his visits. Thereafter, I hardly saw him, but felt his presence around. One such day, Goddy took me to the waterside to meet some of his friends. They were older boys and seniors in our primary school. We went through some alleys to an uncompleted building where they usually gathered and smoked Indian hemp.

“Parker, take. E good for body. E go make you strong.”

I could feel the presence of my friend nodding his stern disapproval.

“No. My friend say make I nor take.”

I was regarded as a small boy.

“A joo,” they would refer to me, meaning a weakling. Smoking gave them boldness to play good football, and talk to girls. I would have nothing to do with this notwithstanding the many attempts to get their friend (me) introduced to the club. Our friendship was not dependent on my inability to smoke. We still had mutual respect for each other. Goddy was my best friend until he died. Staffy was the second best friend.

I never got into smoking. It was unthinkable. I did not need to be bold. I had a good life. Papa was good to me. Although Mama shouted all the time, she was a good provider if you made her see reason. Papa would give you if you could link your demands with your educational pursuits. He was an education freak.

Four

Preparing for the Rite of Passage

Movement from one stage of life to the next had always been challenging, primarily because we go from a known stage to the relatively unknown.

It was an arduous task transiting from the primary school to secondary school. I had grown fond of mathematics, and I was noted for what was popularly known as mental arithmetic. I always got all my sums, no matter how the questions got twisted. I usually wrote one sentence: = answer.

In the fifth class of the six-year primary course, Papa thought I could attempt college entrance examinations. I did and apart from the local school in Warri, I took forms to any school, especially the ones with CC in their abbreviations. That represented college. How were people to know I was a college boy? UCC, SPCC, UCE and a few schools around. Fortunately, I always passed all the entrance examinations, only to be told in clear language I was not due for college yet.

“Why? Papa, but I pass am.”

Papa would say, “Your brother must enter college first.”

I had passed alongside my elder brother, and Papa needed to put the same age difference between us in college life. It was understandable. After all I was yet to obtain my primary 6 First Leaving School Certificate which would qualify me to become a worker. I would be earning a salary as a clerk, or an office hand. The prospects looked more enticing than college. Papa had standard six, which was now the equivalent of primary 6. As the years rolled by my secondary school choices increased with more Cs, including SPC, HCW. Nobody told me about the common entrance exams conducted at that time by the Government of Western Nigeria. My classmates in primary 6 were more fortunate. They knew about the advantages of college life and secured

admissions into secondary school that year. Armed with admission into UCC, UCE, SPCC, and HCW, I was upset when my father announced it was not yet time for me to go to college.

“But I pass na,” I queried.

“My son,” he said rather lovingly. It was not always Papa bothered to explain reasons for his decisions to us, so I was interested in what he had to say to this college aspirant.

“I want you to go to Government College. It is a white man’s school. The money is not big, and the school is very fine,” he said with great emphasis on “white man’s school.”

“Papa, you for tell me now,” I queried, knowing that I could pass any exam set for me. I always got all my sums right.

“I will send you to lesson,” Papa said ending the discussion as fast as he thought to avoid the furious look that was beginning to colour my little face.

Debua Lesson as it was popularly called was run by a mathematician. He was of Ibo extraction, an old Warri boy as we were all called, noted for great successes in preparing pupils for admission into choice secondary schools. Papa knew he could prepare me for Government College.

Our typical lesson started with mental arithmetic where ten sums were dictated in less than 5 minutes, papers exchanged hands and were marked.

“Ten-ten,” Mr Debua would call for students who scored ten marks out of the ten marks allotted for the ten sums with his long whip in hand. I would raise my tiny 3ft 6ins frame, amidst shouts of ‘Small but Mighty’.

I was small but mighty. Sometimes, Goddy and Felix would stand up. The trio led the class. There were older boys who had been in Debua Lesson for many years, but hadn’t quite got the hang of mental arithmetic. In the English language lessons, we learnt the tenses and a lot of grammar. I would also score very high, in the top 5 in class, but could never put up sentences to speak English. Could write, not speak. All attempts by Papa to communicate in the Queen’s English were resisted by my interesting and sweet Pidgin English. Papa did not mind the difference in our medium of communication. We understood each other.

By now, I was a freelance hawker. I had a custom-made

showglass case I usually balanced on my head with hand-made writing, "Sweet Groundnut". I was hawking groundnut. It was easy. I purchased the product, sometimes with the money I made from selecting bad cocoa beans for my father's bags, and the rewards we were given.

I was passing lazily by the market road one day. The sun was hot and busy shoppers lined the street. Business was extremely low and I was tired. I wanted to rest for a while. There was still time, and I had not gone to the sawmillers to display my ware. There was still hope for a good sale. The day was not over, and then a beautiful green Bedford lorry caught my attention.

Parked at the edge of the market road, the lorry sealed with wire gauze carried inscriptions on both of its sides:

***Government of the Western Region of Nigeria,
Ministry of Education,
Government College Ughelli.***

That was all I needed.

The prospects of my travelling in this magnificent large vehicle were overwhelming. I rubbed my fingers along the words and practically attempted leaving an impression of my fingerprints on the vehicle, when a uniformed bulky man stormed out of the driver's seat.

"Small boy," he shouted. "Wetin you dey do there?" he said advancing toward me. "You dey craze?"

Small but Mighty. I could also run and he must have asked himself whether he actually saw a boy around the truck. Showglass on my head and my small piggy bank tied to the wrapper around my neck I was miles away within seconds. I had learned this art from Kehinde. I knew where and how to hide.

The excitement followed me home. It didn't matter what sales I made. I saw my school lorry. I knew I was going to a whiteman's school.

I had never entered a moving vehicle since birth. We had nowhere to go. The market was just six kilometres from our house, and that was a short distance. The popular motor car that allowed everyone in was a brand called Morris Minor. It had an orange stick sticking out of the driver and passenger's side serving as

traffickers to indicate which way it was going at bends. We just looked. You had to pay for the rides. Not us. Mama carried her foodstuff the six kilometres. It was the thing to do, and we sometimes helped.

My elder brother was in college. Now he was a polished kid, and rode a bicycle to school every day. His school was about 8 kilometres from the house. I never knew where the school was, but I knew it was very far. Another country I thought. We never mixed. He studied his books, and all we did was play. Brother would come from school late and my younger brother and I would wait with hunger pangs until he arrived. Sometimes late in the afternoon. Mama put our lunch together, and we never dared eat before his arrival.

“How many meat Mama put for the food?” he would ask getting to our level. We were not college boys.

“Na four,” would be the answer from my younger brother. He was usually more outspoken than me, almost getting as tall as myself, and I was not sure I would defeat him in a wrestling match. I always played safe.

“And una chop the big one commot?”

It was bad for us to share meat and choose ours before his arrival, and even when we did not bother to eat any piece, he expressed his displeasure if we dared to leave less than 70% of the meat for His Excellency, the college boy.

Lesson class was a place to be. There was excitement and many friends to meet and play with, and I was Small but Mighty. About March of the year, Warman was passing by the school. We were in the middle of a football game when Warman passed by, clad in black shorts and a check shirt, I ran out to greet a former classmate.

“Warman,” I shouted, as he walked past clutching a novel.

“Excuse me,” he said. Not even looking in my direction. He could never be seen with a primary school boy. He was a college boy, not just any college. He was from Government College.

The anger swelled in me as I screamed, “Na me you dey make yanga for?” I said, almost pulling at his black shorts. “You go see.”

I was the best in our class in primary 6, and Warman was not in the top 5 in class. How could he shun me in public?

“Leave am,” Goddy screamed feeling angry at his snobbish attitude. It was annoying, and Goddy was annoyed. We couldn’t get over the cold shoulders Warman exhibited.

“We go pass the entrance too.”

“We go go Government College too,” Goddy said with a hiss. This was the last straw. We were determined to pass.

“Papa, I pass,” I screamed as I ran to Papa, waving my result slip. Debua had written letters to us, notifying us of our success at the exams. Every year he recorded impressive entries into choice schools.

“That’s my son,” Papa said with pride.

The months to come were busy ones. Debua had special lessons for us. He had pupils in all schools, Kings’ College Lagos, Government College Ibadan, Government College Umuahia, Dennis Memorial Grammar School Onitsha, Queens’ College Lagos and the schools we then considered lesser schools. The competition would be stiff. Usually about 500 pupils were called for the screening test, with only 48 spaces. I was going to be there.

Papa spent most of the time now at home, drilling me on the most important aspect of the screening test.

“If Oyibo ask you any question, and you nor hear well, make you say ‘Pardon’,” Papa said. I understood. I was not leaving anything to chance.

Goddy and Felix were also going for the interview. As we prepared, Papa bought me a pair of white shorts and shirt. Paul’s dad was also a part-time blacksmith, and had prepared a special iron box for me. It only contained a pair of clothes, a small towel and writing materials. I had chewing sticks for cleaning my teeth. I was to look neat. I never forgot my wrapper, and an old pair of my school uniform. All was set.

GCU

The journey to Ughelli was memorable. I was climbing onto a lorry for the first time. Felix was a big boy, and Goddy was experienced in travelling. He usually shuttled between Sapele and Burutu and knew the routes well. As the ground rushed below my feet, and the bushes ran past on the two hours journey, my excitement was heightened as we sometimes sped through

some bigger lorries carrying firewood and farm produce to other towns. The lorry had been organised by Debua. It was to convey us to the school compound. Excitement filled the air.

As we approached the gates of the school compound we knew we were entering a new and important phase of our lives, and none of us was going to let this chance slip by. We were entering a large European quarters. Large oil bean trees adorned both sides of the approach road to the school compound. It was called the Apian Way. There were colonial houses that housed the Masters' quarters. There were Indian almond trees and guava trees everywhere. I was going to feast. I could get any fruit from any tree with my careful aims. I was in the middle of food. There were no dogs to be set on us like in Warri GRA. I was in luck.

We were separated into groups, and I was placed in Sapele House. Felix was in Forcados House at the end of the line of five houses which served as dormitories. Goddy was in the nearby Ashaka House. The dormitories were named after towns in Mid-West State. It was an all boys' school. Senior boys were allocated in each of the dormitories to monitor our movements. We were to spend a whooping three days, and I was expectant.

Soon the bells rang and we were required to rest. We were to observe siesta, and I had a bed all to myself. The bed was well made, and rather than sleep on it, I tucked myself on the floor. I was not going to spoil my chances by lying on the bed. I was wearing my old school uniform. I was well trained.

"You must show say you neat," Papa had advised. Sleeping on the bed would give me away as a dirty boy. In my excitement, I had gone on a short trip round some almond trees, and had quite a harvest.

"You there, get on the bed," came a voice from a well dressed young boy in trousers and a white shirt. He was a senior. Here was a chance to put my good training into practice. The way he spoke English showed he was trained by the white men.

"Pardon," I said audibly, showing off my new command of English.

"I said get on the bed," he shouted and I climbed the bed and lay still, horizontally, trying not to stain the sheets. We were quite a handful who did not have enough courage to stain the sheets and as we all hurried to bed a few announcements were made.

After siesta, we were to sweep the compound, wash up and report to the school dining hall for supper. I was not hungry. I had quite a fill with almonds and guava. Goddy and I had stored some for later.

As I wondered where I was going to fetch water for my bath, I saw excited boys coming out of the bathroom. I turned on the tap, and to my amazement, water poured from the shower head. I must have washed for close to one hour singing as I scrubbed my tiny body. "Rain dey fall o, Western Region," it was the song we sang as we played in the rains, washing off the falling raindrops from rooftops. "Rain dey fall o, Western Region."

By now the other boys were going to the dining hall. I rushed off and wore my old school uniform. I had been careful to preserve the clean iron lines on the shorts. The shirt was not too clean, but who cared. I only had three pairs of clothing; my wrapper, my old school uniform and my special interview dress.

As we sat down to have our meals, I noticed a whole bowl of rice, stew and a piece of fresh banana in front of me. It had been served by a senior boy. I was to eat it. Never in my life had I had the privilege of eating a whole bowl of rice myself. Then the announcements were made.

"Boys," the Head of School said, "as you go about in the school grounds, make sure you keep the surroundings immaculately clean," he said with such finesse.

The words rang in my ears. I was to speak English like this man. The prospects fired me on. This was the white man's school, and I was in it. I cannot remember sleeping that night. We talked for long hours in whispers. Lights out was strictly observed, but not for me. I never had a light to put out. Our kerosene lamps burned throughout the night, at low glare, not switches.

The second day was the exam day. It was no problem. Clad in my brand new shorts and shirt, I finished in record time and as usual I was sure I answered all questions correctly. Debua had schooled us on speed writing, and Goddy and I were pleased we had done well. At the medicals, we were to strip naked. I knew men had pubic hairs, but I was shocked boys like myself, not quite like myself—I was 3ft. 11ins tall—had pubic hair.

"Wetin you dey look?" a large boy shouted as my eyes were glued to his naked body.

“You dey craze?”

“Nothing,” I said apologetically.

“I dey look that boy,” I said, pointing at a smaller boy behind him.

At the end of the day, some of the boys were asked to go home. Their interview was over. They were to wait for the results. All through the three days, the Principal, Mr C. C. Carter, walked about in the school, and within the three days of the interview, he knew practically all our names. He could identify you in the dark.

The third day was the oral interview. As I was ushered into the room, I almost froze. There were two white men and two black men. The white man sat in the middle. He asked the questions, and the others commented or explained.

“What is your name?”

“Pardon,” I did not understand. Apart from the local nurse in the General Hospital, Warri, I had never spoken with a whiteman before. They seemed to chew their words.

“Pardon,” I repeated to emphasize my good home training.

“What is your name?” he repeated, rather kindly. He apparently suspected I had had some briefing with speaking the white man’s language.

“My name is Eric Ikogho,” I said, genuflecting slightly for effect.

“And how old are you, Eric?”

It was a shock to me. Had he learned of my name after the question, or was he familiar with me? Had I made a mistake?

“Pardon,” I repeated, making sure I was audible and well understood.

“I am 12 years old,” I said lying. Papa had briefed me on age limits for admission into college. I could easily have passed for a 10 year-old boy. I was only 3ft. 11ins tall. Small but Mighty.

My interview lasted for a long time, every answer to their questions was preceded with an emphatic ‘pardon’

Goddy met me outside and wanted to know what went on. Adequately briefed, he ran through his own interview with ease. Goddy could speak the Queen’s English. He had a good educated family. He was out in no time. Had I failed?

As I slipped out of my interview clothes, I tied my wrapper around the neck and we were lost in the bushes and gardens. Our harvest was plenty. I had enough to share with my younger

brother. I was coming from the large European quarters.

The stories were unending. I described all meals to great details, and my brother knew the size of plate and contents. I ate rice with bananas, a combination he could only imagine since I had experienced it myself. He believed me. I was his best friend in the family and he was also to go to Government College. There was no other school.

I remember the sparkle in Papa's eyes the day I announced my results to him. "My son," he said, "I am very proud of you." Accompanied by my younger brother, we went to McIver that day to help him pick cocoa beans, and had a good meal in my honour. The celebrations continued. Debua was happy as usual. His candidates were in the best school.

Goddy was also admitted, but Felix was not so lucky. He was too old for the class, and he had gone to the interview with a letter of recommendation from his elder brother who was an ex-student of the school. Carter regarded that act as a sign of non-confidence in your son's ability to pass on his own. The elimination process included that. The flamboyant in society were not also favourably disposed to secure admission. After all, they could afford expensive schools for their wards. Most of the new students were home grown native children, ranging from farmers' children to the unemployed. Most of us had not had access to the modern luxuries children of the rich stock were used to. We were Government children. I was lucky to be in the whiteman's school.

The three days of the interview were memorable and were the best days of my life. I was alone, free. I lived as an European, amidst guavas, oranges and Indian almond trees. We plucked the fruit (*ebelebor*). I had my bath with modern water system. I had never set my eyes on a shower before. I went to toilet and squatted over a clean metal plate. I used processed paper to wipe up, pulled a chain, and water took away my deposits. Every day was golden. As I told the stories, my entire family was intrigued. They were happy for me, and my younger brother was fired on with the desperate ambition to join me. He was in primary 4, and nobody was going to stop him.

My elder brother was different. He was a college boy and had similar experiences in his school, although not quite as sophisticated as mine.

In the days and months that followed, preparations were intense. There was not much to buy. I had mosquito nets, bed sheets, pillows, towels and new sandals. I was not required to bring school uniforms. Everything would be supplied by the school. Papa made some clothes for me. New shorts made to allow for expansion and new cotton shirts. I was to be at my best. I was going to Government College.

Kehinde had been away for over a year at this time. I never knew his movements. He had had to be in an important place. He was a worker after all, and got a salary. He was a big man.

By now we had moved from the neighbourhood to Ikomi Street in another part of the town. I missed my old friends, especially Kehinde. Papa ventured into retail trading and acquired a shop in a choice location on the major Warri-Sapele road. It was close to Ikomi Street. Papa still continued with the produce trade, but did not farm cocoa beans anymore. It was like a second profession now. Papa was a shop owner and we helped him look after the shop when we were not in school. The school fees were mounting and Papa had to meet up with his own half of the bills. He shared it with Mama. Mama had started a new business and was now selling tobacco, and some provisions in the main market. She was now wealthy. She contributed to our education.

Ikomi Street was a quiet neighbourhood, and we lived in 3 rooms now. Papa was building a house in another area of the town. It was a storey building and it was nearing completion. He had completed the first floor slab and was contemplating moving. Our stay in Ikomi was to be short-lived.

Ikomi Street was quite close to the European quarters, and I spent most of my free days exploring compounds in the GRA for fruits. White children were not friendly and sent their dogs after us. I had many dog attacks, but never stopped. Once I was bitten by a monkey I tried to play with.

I wrote entrance examinations for many of my friends. They were mostly wealthy men's children. The pay was okay. I would go and write down their names and exam numbers, and just get all the sums. They usually made it to the schools.

One day, I was in the examination hall in the Catholic school along the road to Sapele. The paper had started, when I saw Mama searching through the students in the exam hall for her

son. She had been told I would be sent to jail for cheating in the examinations. She did not see me. I slipped out of the hall and resurfaced when she had gone. It was a close shave.

The year ended in grand style. Papa personally selected my dress for Christmas. It was a pair of trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. Papa bought me a tie. He thought I would need it in college. I was the new college boy on the block.



College Boy

Papa treated me like a king. I accompanied him almost every day to the produce shop. There was a lot to teach me. I was going to Government College, Ughelli. I was going to join an elite community. Papa regarded the school as British school. It was elitist.

The list was unimpressive. It did not contain shoes, trousers and all the modern clothes rich children wore. Just a pair of wrapper for sleeping, sandals, and toiletries. We were not required to bring coloured clothes to school, except the clothes we travelled with to school. Papa made sure it was an extension of my school uniform. My hair was completely shaved as if skinning me for sale. A small-sized trunk box with secure locks was bought for me with detailed instructions on how to keep the keys. It was the first time I owned such a property.

The Apian way greeted us as we drove into the school compound. Goddy and I sat at the tail end of a Peugeot car. It was my third ride and the first in a car. The journey was short and uneventful. I had no time to consider the running trees or the ground. We were fast. The driver smoked cigarettes all the way. He rained abuses on slow vehicles that would not make way for him to overtake. The road was very narrow. It was busy with many cars that day. Most of them were filled with school boys and girls. All of us in the car were going to Government College, and the driver had been given strict instructions to deliver us safely to school.

“Go straight to the assembly area,” a boy dressed in grey khaki shorts and shirt told the driver. He sensed he needed directions. He had slowed down and was considering which way to take. The compound looked like a mini village. There were many roads and trees. Few houses were in view. Most of them were shielded

with trees and beautiful flowers and hedges. The setting was like the exclusive Government Reservation Area in Warri.

We alighted, and I carried my metal trunk box on my head. I balanced it expertly. It was my trade tactics. It was not too heavy, just a little more than my showglass. I was barefooted. I was saving my sandals for the real day. Goddy wore his. He had a new attire, knee-long shorts with a belt and a short-sleeved check shirt. He was more modern.

The noticeboard displayed our names. We were only 48 new students, and had been split up into five houses. I was in Sapele House, and Goddy was to go to Ashaka House. We approached a boy who wore the college school uniform.

"I beg, where Sapele House dey?" I asked.

"You must be very stupid," was his reply. "Kneel down there," he ordered.

"Wetin I do?" I retorted. Now he was amused. He was from Warri, and understood my level of ignorance. He came closer and whispered in my ears.

"Dem nor dey speak pidgin here o. And if you want call anybody, say 'excuse me please'." The message was loud and clear, and he was a good boy. He liked me.

"Excuse me please," I said, now feeling very civilised and educated. "Where is Sapele House?"

"Follow me," he said as he led the way. Ashaka House was close by, so Goddy and I went along with him.

There were gardens, and beautiful ixora hedges were used for defining the boundaries of the house. They were well trimmed. Everything looked sparking. Students played tennis on a clay court, and there were pockets of older boys in small groups chatting. They were neat, and wore sandals. Some wore black shorts and green singlets. They were the house colours. Most of them had well-trimmed hair. Mine was clean-shaven. I had no problem with that. It was the first day at school. They had a lot to talk about, their experiences during the holidays. My heart pounded with joy. I was a college boy.

I was placed in the junior dormitory. Some class two boys shared the dormitory with us, and four seniors manned the four corners. I was shown my bed space. I had a wooden locker, and I was to keep my toiletries and wrapper there. I made my bed

and set my mosquito net over it. It was compulsory. We all had mosquito nets. It was one of the things Papa bought for me. There was a central store where we kept our boxes and other personal belongings.

All the new boys were easily identifiable. They had coloured clothes on. The returning students had black shorts and green singlets on. Some had their school uniforms on. There was excitement everywhere. Government College was the place to be. I made a few friends. The next bed to mine was occupied by Towho. Towho was from Obiaruku. He was small too, a few inches taller than me. He was not wearing shoes. We became friends. In all, we were about eleven class one students in the dormitory.

Soon the bell rang. It was time for lunch, and the students began to move to the dining hall. We followed. The second bell rang, and a few latecomers were trapped outside. They would be punished for late coming. The rules were beginning to sink in. We had routines and they were not to be broken.

We sat on long benches and one student shared the food. It was the tradition to share the food from the central bowl and pass rations to each one. I had mine. A class three boy sitting next to me said I could ask for more if I was not satisfied. I immediately signified interest, and more was added to my plate. We used plates and cutlery supplied by the school. They were already there at the table.

“Bless this food oh Lord for Christ’s Sake.”

A loud “Amen” signified the beginning of the meal. I dug my fingers into the bowl of eba, ready to empty my plate. That was trouble. I had committed a serious crime.

“Stand up,” the head of table said.

“How dare you? You have the guts, the blazing temerity to eat with your finger?” He looked angry. What could I have done wrong? I wondered.

I was emulating a boy who sat at the edge of the table near the head of table. He was a senior, and could do that. He was in sixth form. I stood up for the rest of the meal. My food was confiscated and given to someone who needed extra. It was a surprise for me. During the three days I spent during the selection interview, I used only a spoon to feed. Sometimes I used my bare

hands. I had never used a knife to cut eba. I observed carefully as well-groomed students cut and rolled pieces of eba, and used forks to eat. It was part scary and partly nice. This was the whiteman's way of eating. There was no food for me, but I was too excited to be hungry.

The house bells rang. It was siesta. Siesta was compulsory, and you were not to be seen anywhere except horizontally on your bed. It lasted for one hour, and it was the appointed time to read a novel.

Siesta was not strictly observed that day. The house was rather rowdy. As each returning student came he was hailed. Many of them had nicknames and friends would run out to help with their luggage. Some came with their parents in cars. Everyone settled down, after washing and arranging his things. At the end, however, we were given chores to do. Housework usually preceded siesta, and there was a lot of cleaning to do. We had to keep our surroundings clean.

As I danced in the bathroom that evening after housework the school bell rang. It was supper time. I raced to meet up with the others. The school was now filled with students. Many of the students had arrived. We assembled in the house prep room to study in the evenings. We were well briefed on house routines.

Lights out was at 9 pm. We lay on our beds, still, while the senior boys chatted in low voices. They were expected to obey lights out also. Lights out was for the junior classes from class one to four, but the senior ones took the liberty to disobey in our full view. We never dared to even notice. It would have attracted severe punishment at their hands. The 5th form boys stayed on in the prep room till 10 pm. The school generator was usually put off at 11 pm.

I must have fallen asleep well after 2 am in the morning. I was too excited to sleep. I was in a completely new environment. I was not lonely. I was happy.

Our day started at 5.45 am. We had just 15 minutes to tidy our surroundings. We made our beds and got out of our pyjamas, and prepared for housework. We cleared the heaps of grass cut by the senior boys. We swept and raked. At 7 am we went to the bathroom and went to morning classes at 7.30 am. The routine was strictly followed. Any slip usually earned you a detention.

We had been issued school uniforms, black shorts and singlets. I wore my sandals. This was my first day as a college student. We were shared into two arms, A and Alpha. I was in Alpha. The brilliant ones were in A I thought. Why was I in Alpha? I did not miss out anything during the exams.

I sat in front with Tene. Tene was a rich man's son. He was civilised. He was also small, so we shared the front seat. The bigger boys sat behind. We were twenty-four in each class. Each teacher came and gave us textbooks and exercise books. They were published and printed in England. Even the canes were made in England.

I did not see the white man who had interviewed me. He had gone back to England. A Nigerian was now the principal. We had become an independent nation in 1960, and the school was directly under the Western Nigeria Region. The principal spoke English like a white man. He was well schooled, and continued the tradition of the school.

General Assembly was at 9 am. We assembled in the school gymnasium which was also the Assembly Hall for general assembly. The principal made announcements and we were dismissed for breakfast. Troublesome students or students who had problems were usually called out by the principal to see him in his office. It was not a good sign. The routine was easy and I liked it. School before food, then school again. We had time to return to the dormitories to collect whatever we had forgotten to take to school that morning.

A few weeks into the first term the announcement came. It was after all other announcements had been made.

"The following boys should see me in my office immediately after assembly. Eric Ikogho, Steve Omonigho, Okafor Charles, and Morris Akpotojowho."

My heart sank. What had I done? I was a tiny child, the next to the smallest child in school. I was 4ft 1inch tall.

We were in the principal's office before he arrived. He glanced in our direction as he passed by. He did not look stern; rather a wry smile lit his face as he observed us.

"Come in, my boys," he said as he settled down at his desk. We walked in, not sure of what was to befall us. He cleared his throat.

"Boys," he said grinning, "you have been awarded the Western

Nigeria Regional Scholarship. Congratulations.”

We screamed uncontrollably in his office. We were excited. We were tops in the exams we wrote. I was a government scholar. Papa would be proud of me.

Growing Up

As I settled down into college life, life began to change. Responsibilities overburdened me. The laws of seniority were numerous. You could not look in the direction of a senior boy. You could earn a few knocks or peeled knees from punishment. It was an offence to ask for soap from a senior boy to wash his own clothes. I was visibly upset one day.

“Can you give me soap to wash the clothes?” I asked Durango as he heaped all his dirty clothes besides my bed. I was to wash them.

“You have the brazen temerity to ask me for soap?” he yelled. “Kneel down there,” he hissed. “You fag,” he continued as he stormed through the door.

I knelt down until the dormitory prefect came into the room. It must have been close to an hour. Durango had forgotten he told me to kneel down. I was released by the senior. I washed the clothes, but made sure they were not clean. After all I had no soap.

We had full laundry services. We did not wash our school uniforms. The laundryman did. He was usually efficient and you got your laundered clothes within 3 days. The students had other chores to take care of. The clothes lines in the houses were limited. Life was good, except for the bullies. A senior was a senior. Class two boys were our overlords.

Kofi was my classmate. He was a big boy, and had many friends in the upper classes. He was well known. He was a city boy and had a lot of experiences with girls. It was a delight listening to the wonderful experiences he had during the holidays. Kofi inspired us. He had girlfriends. He was our hero. Class two boys did not bully him. They were colleagues.

Tohwo and I were his chums. He taught us many tactics. Sometimes he would describe romantic scenes and methods he employed to have his way with the girls. We would listen attentively. Tohwo took small notes. He was learning how to write love letters

to girls. I was still too small. I could hardly talk in front of boys. Not girls! But one day! I was determined to be a 'big boy'.

Later that year I was diagnosed by the college nurse for hernia. I was to undergo surgery. Medical care was free for us. We were sponsored by Her Majesty, the Queen of England. We were a British institution. During the second term holidays I had the surgery in the Warri General Hospital. I had been referred there by the school nurse. Mama slept in the hospital with me for about two weeks. She could hardly come to terms with the fact that her child was going to be cut open. She was frightened.

I ate choice foods. My meals were dominated by sardines, corned beef and eggs. It was my golden opportunity.

"Wetin you go eat?" Mama would ask.

"I nor go fit eat, belle go pain me," I knew the routine.

"My pikin, I beg eat something now," she would plead. That was the time to strike.

"I go manage sardine, and rice, and egg," the list would be reeled out. "Plus *Krola*."

Grateful for the chance to help me get well, Mama would ensure my list was well attended to. I had a pleasant holiday. I was to be discharged earlier but I made sure I played sick. The nurses liked me, and cooperated. When Mama was not around I went to the hospital grounds to gather guava fruits and Indian almonds. I was proficient in bringing them down. I had grown up in the ghetto neighbourhood.

The stitches were removed before I went back to school. The school nurse examined me and gave me "Off Duty." "Off Duty" boys were sacred cows. We were not allowed to engage in any hard work, and could not participate in sports that could strain our wounds. I was free. Armed with my golden slip I would show any senior who wanted to punish me or send me on errands.

"Excuse me please, I am off duty," I would say, trying to look as sick as possible. That was my saving grace. I was now a lazy kid around the block. During housework sessions I cut people's hair. I was the house barber. It was the only way I could be put to use, and I cut well.

Papa was delighted at my progress in college. I passed well. Always coming within the top 10 in both classes. We had moved to a new area of town. Papa had completed the ground floor of

his storey building and we all moved in. He was the landlord. A proud man. My elder brother was doing well in his college. Papa had two sons in college. My brother was in boarding house. He hardly came home even on holidays. He would spend it with friends, sometimes in other towns. I was a Warri boy and my territories were only limited to Warri and Ughelli. I was not even aware other towns existed. Never knew where they were located.

Papa gave me a room. I had a room to myself. My room was next to his. Staffy lived a few streets away. He spent most of his time with me when on holidays. He was in the same class with me, but was from Forcados House in school. He lived with an uncle. He was not well treated, but was a good boy.

Staffy's mum sold cooked food by the roadside. She was very popular. She was Mama Ewa (Mama Beans), and she fried ripe plantain with cooked beans. *Dodo* and *ewa* as we called it was also a delicacy. It was our favourite food in Government College. We always preferred the soft, ripe and old plantain. It was called "koom". Staffy's mum sold *koom*. She was a specialist. Staffy would always serve me with a big bowl of *koom*. We spent our evenings helping Staffy's mother, and she always made sure I ate well.

"My pikin, you don chop so?" she would always ask as soon as she noticed me around the food stall. She was always busy. Her place was a busy place.

Durango was a year older than us in school. He was a senior. He liked music, and was regarded as a local pop star. He played the guitar well and was a local Elvis Presley fan. He dressed and walked like Elvis Presley. I liked Elvis also as a role model, and I always imagined myself as a local Elvis. We wore Elvis caps, but I preferred dressing up like the Beatles. Durango played in the local dance band. It was the Mariners Dance Band. I was a good singer, but never made the band. My elder brother bought me a guitar, but Kendo, one of the seniors also in Durango's class, took it. Seniors had rights undefined over juniors, and he decided he was going to possess my guitar, and there was nothing I could do about his decision. He was also a member of the Mariner's Dance Band, and played the guitar for the band. He practically owned my guitar, and monopolised it. I never had a chance to learn beyond the local Rex Lawson tunes. I could not play rock

music.

I was a king in the second year. I was a senior. I could order any class one boy around, and could not be fagged. I was off-duty. The boys in Sapele House were large. It was better for me. My favourite punishment was kneeling down. That way we would be almost of the same height, and I could give them knocks. They never dared to retaliate. My classmates were on hand to ensure that. We were very much in charge now. We were very excited to be seniors.

Saturday evenings were social nights in school. We had a variety. Sometimes we danced to tunes from a record player, or volunteers came out to sing songs from known artistes. I never had the courage to step out for a song. The ground would give way under my feet. My favourite Saturday entertainment programme was treasure hunt. We would be given clues to treasures hidden in locations around the school compound and we would hunt for them. It was academic, and sometimes I would function as team leader. We were divided into groups. The winner was always rewarded with prizes. It was usually food and snacks. We ate biscuits and took soft drinks. Sometimes the Marina's Dance Band would entertain. I managed to play drums for the band a few times although I never officially made it to the band as a member, as I was interested in music.

I was in a hurry to function as a teenager. Becoming of age meant you had a girlfriend. I was not able to speak to girls at that time. Never knew what to say. Never had the courage to face them. In class three, I became more desperate. Tohwo had made successes. He had a girlfriend and contributed to the stories of exploits during holidays. I had nothing to contribute. As they gave graphic description of the romance process, I would masturbate. I was determined to taste of the golden fruit.

I set out during the first term holidays to get a girlfriend. I had had sufficient training in speaking to girls.

"Excuse me, my name is Eric Ikogho. I am from Government College. Please may I know your name?" I said visibly shaking as the well-rehearsed words came out in disjointed breaks from my mouth. It was important to let the girl know early you were from Government College. Every girl was privileged to have a GCU boy for a boyfriend.

She took one sour look at me, laughed briefly and crossed the road to the other side. She was walking with her three-year-old sister. I was devastated. What went wrong? I knew I was handsome and dressed well. I had sported an 'afro' hair, and I walked with a slight swagger. I wore Beatles boots, and sported a sleeveless white shirt.

I examined the neighbourhood to check if anyone noticed the drama. My heart pounded with shame as I made my way home. I was miserable. She was to answer my first question before I delivered the manifesto. I could not pass the first hurdle.

Rachael lived next door in Papa's house. They were tenants and she lived with her mother's sister. She came from the village to get education. She was a big girl with large breasts. She did all the house chores for the family. She was the househelp. Rachael was a primary school pupil. She was in primary five. She was experienced and liked to tease me whenever she had the chance to. She always wanted us to talk about school, but I was too chicken to face a girl. Rachael understood my plight and tried to warm up to me. She always greeted me with a large smile. I was a college boy. She would wait for her aunty to go to bed before washing plates. I always found a way around the kitchen. I would pretend I was going to the latrine.

"Where you dey go"? Rachael asked.

"I dey go piss."

"You nor go follow me wash plate today?" Rachael said as she approached me. She held my hand, and I found myself almost going underground. Soon Rachael held me to herself, her breasts on my chest. My heart pounded as I held Rachael. She dragged me to a dark corner in the kitchen and fondled my body. I was on fire. Rachael was raising her dress to reveal her bare bottom when a door opened in the direction of my mother's room. Rachael ran to her bench and was scrubbing away at the plates. I hurried to the male latrine and shut the doors.

"Eric, where you dey?" I heard Mama's voice.

"Mama, I dey shit," I called out in my locked cell. I waited for tensions to cool off before coming out. I could not look in Rachael's direction as I moved to my room. I almost did it, I thought.

On Friday, I went to church to confess my sins. I had embraced

a girl, and I wanted to have carnal knowledge with her. I needed to discover the joyful feeling. Tohwo was already doing it.

The parish priest was very unhappy with me. He asked a lot of questions. He wanted to know if I put anything in her body. Was she a big girl? Was she beautiful? Where did we live? I became uneasy. I was speaking with God. Why would God want the details?

I was a confirmed churchgoer. In class one I was baptised. Benjamin Katey was my godfather. He was my classmate from Lagos and was a devout Christian. I retained my name Eric as my baptismal name. Ben taught me the catechism. We always went to church on Sundays. Students of different denominations gathered to attend their churches. The school did not endorse any faith and never compelled anyone to go to church. In the third year, I was confirmed. I chose my father's name as my confirmation name. I was now called George.

I was a devout Christian and had great reverence for the priests. I believed they spoke with the Lord, and brought messages from the Lord.

“Go and say Hail Mary 200 times,” was the final verdict.

As I left the pew with clenched fists, I walked away from the altar, and out of the church. I was unhappy. How could God punish me for a sin I had not even committed? Rachael had been the one trying to break my ice. It was unfair. God did not speak with the priest. I stopped going to the church.

I never mentioned any of this at our usual holiday briefing. I only listened as Kofi gave us new tips. Tohwo was now experienced and shared some of his exploits with me. He had slept with a number of girls. He gained his first experience in a brothel. It was easy he said. Just approach the woman of your choice and say you wanted to see her. You bargained the price, usually two shillings and you would be there. It was a fascinating way out.

During the third term holidays I was determined to have a breakthrough. I was sure Rachael would be my partner. I did not mention Rachael during our discussions. She was a primary school girl, and a Government College boy was not to be found in such circles. Our partners had to be from choice schools. The Anglican Girls Grammar School, Ughelli had a generous supply of girls. Others went for Queens' College girls. Hussey College

girls were pretty and neat. They would do.

The compound was lonely. I expected Rachael to announce her presence as usual with her singing. Rachael was gone. She had died a month ago. I was unhappy. She was my partner.

As I paraded Agbasa area in Warri, I had my hands in my pockets to suppress the bulge in my shorts. I examined the women. They were large. How was I to approach a woman of my mother's size and ask for sex. I rolled it over. Finally, I summoned enough courage to approach a fair-skinned lady. The corridor was dark, and we did not see very far.

The lady was plump and big. She had big bottoms, and stared at me as I approached.

"I wan see you," I stammered.

"Ok, nar two shillings," she said, leading the way inside to the single half-lit room. I was nervous, and it even showed in the way I walked. I almost tripped as I followed her into the room.

The room was poorly lit. A kerosene room lamp was hanging on the wall. I could hardly see my way around the narrow room, but I was conscious of her gaze. It was as if she was anticipating my next move. I reached out with my two shillings.

"See the money," I said, stretching out my hands. I did not know what to do next.

She parted the curtains over a small bed. The beddings were stained and untidy. As she reached for an object under the mattress, I bolted out of the room.

What would happen? I thought as I moved in quick steps out of the area. 'Government College boy flogged by a prostitute in Agbasa'. I was lucky to escape. I walked as fast as I could without attracting anyone's notice. Mostly quick steps in case someone raised an alarm. I had failed woefully. Another failed attempt, but it was only the beginning of the holidays. There was still time.

My mother sold tobacco in the market, and also stocked cigarettes. Papa was a chain smoker. He smoked *Galleon*, the popular brand at that time. Kofi was a smoker. It made him look like a big boy. Goddy had been smoking when we were in primary school. It was the next thing to do. I had to be seen holding a cigarette in the streets. It was a sign of sophistication. I was in class three. In January, I would be in class four. I had no excuse.

Mama was usually careless with her tray. When she was not in the room I stole a few sticks of *Rough Rider* from her stock. That afternoon I almost choked myself in cigarette smoke. As I inhaled, my eyes rotated. I felt dizzy. That was the sign of toughness. I had found the formula. I practised smoking for sometime, and saved the rest for action later.

Lucille was a fair-skinned girl. She always passed in front of my house. She always came from the direction of Staffy's house. She visited Staffy's cousin who attended Our Lady's High School in Warri. She was in class three. She was perfect, pretty and elegant.

I knew the time she passed by our house. Minutes before the scheduled time I would draw a few puffs out of my cigarette, feel emboldened, and as she walked past the front of our house, I would slide in her direction. The words were the same. I had not learned any new methods.

"Excuse me, my name is Eric Ikogho, I am from Government College Ughelli," I was smooth. I was now big, elegant and felt cool. I was practically in class four.

Lucille would smile and look down stopping as if she was considering an appropriate answer. The words never came, and I would have nothing else to say. I couldn't continue with the manifesto. She had to tell me her name first. It was the only sign that she was interested. I must have attempted this over ten times, and each time I drew a blank wall. I had no girlfriend to report back.

Lido Club

Kofi formed a club in school called the Lido Club of Government College Ughelli. Kofi was a social icon. He knew many band leaders and was invited to almost any important social gathering in Warri or Sapele. His experience came to bear in Lido Club. He was not the first president. He conceded that to a class five boy. I was in class four, and I joined the club. It was an exclusive club for the big boys. Kofi organised shows in Warri and Sapele. Only special people were invited, and attendance to our shows was strictly by invitation.

I was a smooth talker. I smoked, and could speak the local American slang. I had read a number of novels by Peter Cheney.

Lemmy Caution was my hero. He had style. I was favoured as MC in our shows. We engaged the choice band. Fire-Flys Dance band was a good band. They played good highlife music, sometimes playing Rex Lawson songs. Rex Lawson was the king of highlife, and drew large crowds at shows. I now attended these shows, sometimes functioning as MC.

I now had an extra feather added to my cap. I belonged to the exclusive Lido Club. Girls wanted to be included in the exclusive list of the people invited. It was an honour to be called.

During the first term holidays, Staffy and I always went to the cinema together. We went to the Premier Cinema. It was quite far from where we lived, but we loved Indian films. The love scenes were instructive for us.

“Take me go see film today,” Staffy’s cousin said to me one evening. She knew we would be going to the cinema that evening. There was a popular actor showing that day.

“Okay, we go go,” I answered. I was feeling cool that evening. Patrina was not a very attractive girl judging from the standards we set from the actresses in Indian films, but she was good-looking. She was just as tall as I and made a good match. I was going out with a girl.

Patrina sat close to me in the cinema house. She held my hands, and did not object when I placed my hands on her laps. I soon advanced further, and I fumbled with sensitive parts of her body. She never objected. I had made it. That night we stayed late and talked. She amazed me with revealing stories about me. She had been in love for a year now, but I had never looked in her direction. I had a girlfriend now.

We spent long hours together. She practically spent the whole day in my room. We would play, and kiss, but never went beyond that. Patrina was a Catholic. She might get into trouble. She also attended the local Catholic Girls’ School in Warri. However our relationship was for talking and fumbling each other, never beyond. We were both afraid, but I was in love with my new girlfriend.

I had a small photo of her which adorned my pillow. The memories of the romantic times we spent together kept me on. We wrote several love letters to each other.

Bobordi was a handsome boy, and was always conscious of

his good looks. Tohwo was almost my height, but was now a very big boy. He had a girlfriend in each of the four secondary schools in the area. He also knew how to meet the club girls. I secretly admired him for his courage. As he gave a graphic description of a new girl in the club house in Ughelli, I sometimes masturbated. I was determined to break the ice this time. I had not succeeded, but no one knew.

"I will go with you tonight," I said, pretending I wanted to add to my numerous exploits.

I became versatile in breaking bounds after lights out. Most times the games master would lay ambush for us. He never caught us red-handed, even though he knew us well. He was a considerate man. He knew we had to be boys. It was a lot easier to get your fill with the club girls. I did not have to deliver a manifesto. Just "I wan see you" and you were right in bed with her. How nice!

During the midterm holidays in the second term, Bobordi spotted a new girl in town. He gave a graphic description of the girl and we almost thought she was an Indian girl. He was going to meet her the next day. Bobordi was talking to Tohwo and a group of other big boys. They were looking in my direction starry eyed. As I approached to find out what was amiss, they hailed.

"Small but Mighty"

"What happened?" I questioned.

"They are all dying for you in the girls' school."

It was Lucille. She told Bobordi she already had a boyfriend in our school, Eric!

I had given up on even trying. For 2 years I never got past mentioning my name without a reply. Was she secretly in love with me?

On Sunday, I put on coloured clothes. We were on midterm break, and I could dress that way. The deadline was usually 6 pm. I made sure I looked handsome. I used a relaxer on my hair. I sported an afro.

As I moved toward Lucille she began to smile. I had won. Confidently I asked how she was.

"I got your message yesterday."

Lucile laughed. She never said a word. She always walked with her 6-year-old sister. This was her insurance cover. The

discussion was one-sided. Bobordi and Tohwo walked a short distance behind me. They were curious. I left her as we approached the police station. Her father was a policeman. She gave Bobordi all the details. She was in class three, and a junior girl in class two had my photograph and bragged about me to her schoolmates. Was this not the Eric that talked to her many times during holidays? She was worse than I was. I took cigarettes to embolden me to have the courage to deliver my manifesto. She could never have the courage to answer, even though she wanted me. She was shy. Too shy to even look in my direction. She had to talk with Bobordi.

My romance with Patrina was short-lived. Bobordi thought she was not a beautiful girl. She was dark-skinned and fat. She was also short. Why would the star in the block date an ugly girl?

The school organised a social gathering in the third term. Girls from the Anglican Girls' Grammar School were invited. They usually came in school uniforms. The class five boys and boys in the sixth form wore the college dark grey trousers and school tie. The other classes dressed in native attire, wrapper and shirt. We were not allowed to wear underwear. I always moved swiftly to the side reserved for the girls.

"Please excuse me dance," was the polite way to ask for the next dance. If the girl flowed along, you were okay. I scored well. Bobordi's girl was in the dance. They showed off. She was beautiful, and had very good dance steps. We enjoyed good highlife music.

The third term holiday was special. We hosted an afternoon party in West End club. It was called a 'jump'. The less adventurous boys and girls could attend jumps. I sported an Elvis Presley outfit, dark glasses and Beatles boots. I wore an Elvis cap. I was the MC.

Alama Kruger was a neighbour in my father's compound. He was extremely handsome, and was the toast of any growing boy. He could speak in American slang, and walked with grace. He was smooth. He was a friend from another school. He was a star. He always got an invitation to attend any important function in town. He was my special invitee to Lido Night. As I announced the next performance by Fire-Flys, Alama Kruger glided from his table where he sat with his sister and I to the opposite table. There were three girls, who were far from being attractive. Kruger

walked up to one and asked for a dance. She looked at him, as if examining an escapee prisoner, hissed and continued her discussion. She turned Kruger down. I imagined how Kruger must have felt. I felt the same way when my first date crossed the road and left me in full view of passers-by.

Just then a rough looking boy approached the girls' table, and even before asking her she was all over him on the dance floor. I carefully examined the whole situation, and many questions fired the anger in me.

Who did girls think they were? Why must boys court them, and not the other way? After all boys spent money on them.

That little drama shaped my life for a long time. I was to have nothing to do with girls in the next four years. I decided to patronise the club girls. They would not discriminate, or show off. The club girls were there, no trouble or refusals, no stress. They were going to be my girls.

It was quite a shock to Patrina.

"There is something important I want to tell you," I said as she settled down on the bed that morning. She usually preferred sitting on my bed. I made sure of that. My clothes and books would occupy the two chairs in my room and leave only the bed free. That way I did not have to make a speech to get her on the bed.

"Wetin?" she asked, rather taken aback.

I stared into space for sometime. The words could not come easy. It was no fault of hers. Why was I doing this? I was too upset with girls to even think at that time. "I can't continue again. I don't want you again."

"Eric, wetin I do?" she asked, unable to understand the sudden change in my attitude.

"I nor want girlfriend again," I said with a frown on my face.

"Na because of Lucille?" she snapped, as if she had come to discuss Lucille with me. "Na im make am dey boast say im be your girlfriend?"

"I nor want anybody. Make una leave me alone. I nor want trouble." I put up a straight face.

Patrina cried uncontrollably. I was sorry. I pleaded with her and apologised. She went home that day relieved. I was not serious with breaking up with her. After all I had held her to console her.

I still loved her, she thought.

The next day, Patrina came knocking on my door.

"I don't want to see you," I said coldly. "Go."

Patrina left devastated. Soon after Staffy knocked on my door.

"Who be that?" I asked in an unfriendly voice. Was I expecting she was still lurking around for a chance to rush in?

"SMBP," came the familiar voice. My classmates called me SMBP. It was Staffy. Staffy was the official peacemaker. He had no girlfriend, and was my colleague. We preferred the no-stress club.

"No be say we quarrel. E nor do me anything. I don tire for girl wahala. Dem dey too make yanga," I immediately told Staffy as he entered the room. I was sure he would understand. Staffy was closer to me than Patrina.

"I wan stay alone. I don tire for girlfriend." Staffy understood as I explained. He did not have time for girl matters himself.

"Patrina just dey cry for house," he said, trying to justify his reason for coming. Staffy was a dear friend, and it did not take time to reach a compromise. He was to appease Patrina. Lucille was not the cause of my actions. I had decided to repent and face religion. Nobody would fault that reason. Patrina was also a devout Catholic. We had broken up.

Class five was the certificate class. We were seniors, and could wear trousers to church on Sundays. A new House was established the year before, and I was one of those selected to pioneer the new House. It was believed at that time that the troublemakers in the five existing houses were selected for eviction and dumped in the new House. We had a housemaster. He epitomised a Village Headmaster, very un-modern. He had crude ways of doing things.

Federal House was a unique house. We occupied a teacher's house. It was a four-bedroom bungalow. Our head of house was liberal. We were both seniors, although he was in the 6th form. My former house produced the Head of School. He was power-drunk, and set out to remove all seniority rights from the class five students. He was a bully. Federal House was a launch pad for breaking bounds. We connected a secret pathway through the bushes to the centre of town. We would go after lights out. Bobordi was in Federal House. Tohwo usually joined us after lights out.

I was an artist. JP was a creative teacher, and he trained us to be artists. He was unhappy; fine arts was regarded as a vocation for dropouts. He was scorned by other teachers, especially the mathematics and science teachers. It was the first time we were doing fine arts as a subject in the final examinations.

Koti never liked fine arts.

“This kin yeye subject,” he said in class one day.

“Who said oni yeye?” JP screamed with a lisp in his speech. He was a short man, barely taller than the table on the dais. He was visibly angry.

There was dead silence. Class was disrupted that day. He could not control his anger. It was enough stomaching remarks from the obese Frenchman who taught us French. Coming from his own student was the limit for him. JP was determined to prove himself, and we helped him. Jemite and I staged an Art Exhibition in the first term. It was a hit. It attracted over 1000 art lovers. We did not control the business angle, but had a lot of encomiums poured on us. We exhibited sculptural pieces, oil paintings, water colour and charcoal. JP was proud of us. He had won.

My religious life had taken a new turn at this time. I attended a Cherubim and Seraphim church. It was owned by a ‘white skinned’ man. He was liberal, and taught us to be independent. Sometimes I was even nominated to lead Sunday service. It could be your turn anytime. The general overseer would just sit on the bench, and would not interfere with whatever way you decided the service should go that day. You were the pastor. It was an exciting church, and we really liked him. We were comfortable. Bobordi and Toowo attended this church also. We were assured of our relevance in the sight of God. At that time he taught us not to regard ourselves as sinners, but children of God with equal rights as saints. It was good enough for us. I had questioned the validity of most of the doctrines on sin, reincarnation and the catastrophe that was to befall us on judgement day. I was beginning to style myself a free thinker.

In the beginning of the second term, I was determined to make good grades in the forthcoming West African School Certificate (WASC) examinations. It had been changed from the Cambridge Certificate Exams to WASCE. In 1963, after Nigeria became a Republic, the administration of the school changed hands. We

were under the Western Nigeria Regional Government. We no longer enjoyed direct British influence, but still maintained the British traditions. Our supplies still came from England, including our canes. They were ordered from Philip & Tacey. They were well known. Our principal was a bullish big man. He had muscles. He was from the same village as our housemaster, and shared the same characteristics.

As I lit my kerosene lamp after lights out to study for my WASCE, came the familiar voice. He must have been lurking in the dark eager to catch the stubborn boy at his game.

“You are reading in the night,” came the voice.

“I want to do my homework,” I replied, hoping to get some commendation.

“Very good,” he said with a cynical grin. You could never predict Mr Gwelle. We called him bush man. Three of us were apprehended for lighting our lamps.

“The following boys should meet me in my office. Ikogho, Bobordi, and Tohwo,” The principal announced rather casually.

What could have happened? It was no coincidence we were all from Federal House. It had to be connected with our reading last night.

The principal was seated as we entered his office. He was calm. “My boys,” he said. “You were reading last night after lights out.” We glanced at ourselves. Mr Gwelle had reported us to the Principal. It had to be a commendation. After all we wanted to make good grades.

“You know that is very good. You want to make us proud, this school will not condone indiscipline, and vagabonds who take laws into their hands.” We were stunned as he began to prepare to unleash brutal terror. We had committed an abomination. Breaking school rules was bad. Acquiring the displeasure of a housemaster was even more fatal. Why had Gwelle deceived us? He could easily have seized the lamps and given us detentions.

Bube was big and bullish. He wore an old suit, and wore cufflinks with his white long-sleeved shirt. He began to undress. As he removed the coat to reveal his large biceps, and roll up his sleeves, Bobordi began to cry.

“I am going to give you 24 strokes of the cane, and you will cut grass for two days in the field,” he announced as he pointed

to the football field in front of the Assembly Hall.

"I have off-duty," I announced looking down and presenting a hardened face.

Bube was angry. He began to shake. He had clenched teeth. Was he going to flog or kill us? we thought.

"And you, Bobordi," he charged.

"The same, Sir," Bobordi said, emboldened by my courage.

Bube did not bother to ask Toowo.

"You will all leave this school this minute. You are hereby suspended for 2 weeks," he shouted as he proceeded to chase us personally out of his office.

I arrived Warri to meet Mama waiting for me. She had known of the suspension order. Mama had been told in her dreams. She could protect her children with the visions she had from her goddess. They usually manifested as loud communications which she voiced. They looked like loud dreams. At this time I had large patches of dry skin all over my face. They were mumps. I had no sensation in them. Mama announced we were going to Okpara to consult the oracle. It was a serious matter. Who was I to argue? I had to be a good boy. I was recently suspended from school for a crime committed against the school, and here was I getting solutions to my predicament. I had to be a good son. This was no time to display my new religion. I tagged along.

The announcement came from the herbalist. I was poisoned by my cousin who lived in the same compound with me. He was my classmate. I had taken the 1st position in class the term before. That angered him, and subsequently any exams I took met with failure. I was refused admission into Government College to do the HSC course. It was supposed to be automatic, but I performed badly in the screening examination. Moreover my scholarship did not cover HSC. I could not get admission to other schools.

"We go go stream, e go baff for river," came his announcement. I offered no resistance. Mama had taken one good look at me as if to spot any signs of resentment on my face.

"Jaguda Boy," she said. She nicknamed me Jaguda Boy. It meant stubborn child. She was expecting me to refuse the order. Not me. I was a good boy now.

"I hear," was my shocking reply. "I go go." Mama was pleased to hear me cooperate with a native doctor.

Ogbu led the way through a winding path through a dense forest. I walked in the middle of a single file. Ogbu was in front, and Mama was following behind me. I was under very strict instructions not to dare look back. I obeyed everything.

We arrived the banks of a filthy stream. Ogbu went into the stream with clenched teeth. Mama was also chewing some dark leaves and murmuring to herself. I watched, getting a little frightened. I had heard of crocodiles attacking people on the banks of streams like this. I was expecting a surprise anytime now. Mama saw I was shaking with fright. She moved closer as if to reassure me.

Soon Ogbu came out of the stream. He never looked in my direction. He stared at the river as if he was talking to some unseen spirits. He was preparing the herbs in a large earthen pot. He mixed the concoction with local gin. He had armed himself with a bottle. Soon he was ready.

“Pull your dress,” he ordered in a steady voice. The gods must have spoken through him. I obeyed, removing my school uniform. I barely had time to change from my school uniform. Everything was moving too fast.

Carefully he smeared the concoction all over my body, paying attention on my face. As soon as he finished, he repeated his earlier warning.

“No look back, no look any side. Face front.” He was emphatic.

Now I became scared. What will happen? I thought. I was never taken by such fetish threats, but I was under suspension from school. I had to behave nicely to Mama who had been good in spite of my misbehaviour.

The journey back was ‘delicate’. I was in front, and he gave specific instructions and directions on which way to take. “Left”, “right”, “pass here”, “pass straight”, came his unending commands as we found our way back to his shrine.

The shrine was in itself frightening, although I was not intimidated. Stale blood from slaughtered animals adorned wooden carvings. There were large cowries, and metallic objects. There were raffia palm leaves, red cloth, white cloth, black cloth, dried goat skulls and bones. Then my eyes caught a dried human skull, or so it seemed. Now I was frightened. After some incantations and further smearing of another locally made

concoction on me, he plucked out a large feather from a bunch. It was large, not fitting a normal fowl. It must have been a large eagle.

He threw the feather outside. It was blown around by the wind. As he sang and clapped, the feather fell down flat. Shaking his head in utter disappointment, he looked at me as if with self-pity.

“E never commot, we go go again,” he announced, meaning we were to repeat the journey to the forest. Mama immediately became extra nice to me.

“Jaguda Boy,” she said.

“You dey hungry?” she inquired. Mama would not offer me a meal in a restaurant unless she wanted to offer me a bribe. I understood, and agreed to go back.

“Make we come back first,” I said indicating my willingness to repeat the journey.

The feather danced as he sang and clapped his hands. It danced to the rhythm. It was pure magic before my eyes. A light feather responding to music, and responding to commands.

“Stop!” and the feather would stop its movements in spite of the wind blowing outside. I was convinced he was a powerful man. Now I obeyed his every instruction. He handed me a bottle of his concoction with a lot of gin. It had a peculiar smell.

“Take one shot every morning when you wake,” he instructed. “Only one,” he emphasized. “No eat banana,” he added. It was banana my cousin had used to poison me. We loved banana. We used banana and pawpaw to eat rice. It was the normal thing to do. Banana was served with all our rice meals in school. How was I to keep to this new rule?

“The poison don comot,” he reassured Mama. “Dem do am make e fail, e nor go fail again,” he continued regarding me as he spoke. “The face own go be anoda day, I nor dey do two things at once,” he concluded as he moved swiftly into another room as if dismissing us instantly.

“Ogbu, we dey go,” Mama called out in Urhobo. He was her medicine man.

Two weeks sped past. I was cautioned against playing with my classmates again. I had no faith in the medicine man. As soon as I arrived school that evening, I went to town. I was early,

and still had a few hours to the end of my suspension order. I confessed all my sins to my trusted overseer. He gave me a rude shock.

“Who do you think gave the medicine man the power to help people like you?” he asked, smiling as he looked into my eyes.

“Devil,” I replied.

“My son,” he said with compassion. “There is nothing like the devil, He is only a creation of man. God gave permission to doctors, lawyers and all professionals to help mankind. So is the medicine man. If you don’t want to use the concoction he gave you, throw it away. You have the power to overcome any obstacle thrown on your path through God.”

This was different, I thought. Why was he philosophical? I trusted him.

“You can bless holy water. Take a glass of water and read Acts Chapter 3,” he continued. “Wash your face with it,” and you will be healed.

I did just that. It was a turning point. Was it possible that Mama was not doing anything sinful by worshipping her god? Was God that benevolent as to allow native doctors also into His kingdom? How about witches? This would later shape things for me.

I liked bananas. I never stopped eating them. When I tasted the concoction out of curiosity, it had a lot of gin. Gin was intoxicating so I kept the bottle for later. I needed it as a big boy, not as medicine.

The exams went well, but I did not write any other exams for Higher School Certificate admissions. They had closed admissions. I was sure I would get admission after my WASCE results.

I came out in style. I had division 1. We were sixteen boys who came out with division 1. I excelled in the exams.



Journey to the West

We waited for a long time to board the rather large passenger lorry to Ibadan. There were mostly schoolboys and girls going back to school. You could tell by their suitcases. Some wore school cardigans. It was a time to show off your school. The excitement could be felt in the air. It was also a time to make new acquaintances. The motor company was set up by the colonial masters. It was very well organised and was regarded as a safe mode of travel. Armels Transport was noted for its track record on safety. I had bought a second-class ticket. It was a place to be. It showed class. The first class was usually reserved for very important dignitaries, usually government officials.

It was my first trip outside the Warri environs, and I was careful not to be noticed as a 'fresher'. I was well dressed and tried as much as possible to 'look before leaping'. I was told it would be a long journey, and Papa just gave me instructions at the motor park in Warri. I was practically an adult now in the eyes of Papa. I could look after myself now.

The crossing over the Ethiope River in Sapele was fascinating. I had not seen large ships before. Now our bus was being carried over a river by one. We stayed in the deck observing the boats dance to waves from our ferry. The skills of the boatmen riding through the waves were an art. Little boys, accompanying their parents on fishing expeditions did not even regard the approaching ferry as they cast their nets. It was as if they were expecting escaping fishes to be trapped in their nets.

The Ethiope River is regarded as the deepest river in West Africa. I was conscious of this and never ventured near the edge of the boat. I observed from a safe distance. The other side of the bank was busy. Bus conductors scouted for passengers to fill waiting vehicles to take people to Benin. Our bus was the last

vehicle to enter the ferry, and had to be the first to get out. Soon we were on our way to Benin. The journey had taken about 2 hours. How long was this one going to take?

“Let’s go now,” complained a young lady. She was wearing a school cardigan, and I saw the inscriptions on her badge. Olivet Baptist High School, Oyo. I was happy and approached her.

“Good afternoon,” I said smiling. “Are you going to Oyo?” I asked, trying to be as polite as possible. I had been told people got together at bus stations. It was even a place to make new girlfriends. I didn’t want one, and I had to sound as disinterested as possible.

“Yes, nar dier I dey go,” came a rather rude reply I thought. I was speaking the Queen’s English. I was a senior student.

“I am also going to Olivet,” I said maintaining my position. “I am going for HSC,” I continued trying to show off.

“I am now in Upper Six,” she said looking interested in striking a conversation with me. I was not a good talker, especially with girls, but I needed this conversation.

“How long will the journey take to get to Ibadan?”

“Two days,” came the shocking reply. “We would sleep on the road at Ilesha.”

We boarded the lorry as soon as the announcement came over the public address system. I sat at a choice seat. It was a window seat. A well-dressed girl sat next to me in the second-class compartment. She was a student of a girls’ school in Ibadan. Veronica sat opposite me, facing me. There were two rows of seat in second class, benches faced each other. It was enough comfort for a bumpy ride through the narrow colonial road to Ibadan. We were grateful to enter. Veronica was pleased with the seating arrangement. She would keep up our conversation with her junior in school.

“Where are you from?” Veronica asked, establishing familiarity with me, in case the other girl thought I was an uncharted territory.

“Warri,” I said, trying to establish neutrality. I was not going to go far with this one. She is my senior, older than me.

“I am also from Warri,” the girl sitting beside me said with a smile. She was happy to meet someone from her place.

“Where in Warri?” I quickly asked.

“Robert Road. My parents live there.” Joy was a class three

girl attending St Anne's College, Ibadan. She was an Ibo girl. Her parents were traders from Warri. They had lived in Warri practically all their lives. Joy was born there. She was interested in sports, and represented her school in the high jump event. She was in the senior team in spite of her class, and represented her school in sports. She was proud of the achievement.

Soon Joy fell asleep and rested on my shoulders. She was unaware she was resting on my body, but I was pleased. I gently put my arms around her to make her more comfortable. Veronica looked on, uncomfortably. She did not seem to like Joy. She was too forward she thought.

We stopped in Agbanikaka to freshen up. It was a tradition, I was told to stop and buy food. Veronica offered to buy me food. After all she was my senior. She also wanted to establish territory. I was happy for the attention. By the time we got to Ibadan the next day, Veronica and I had struck a relationship. It was mother and son. She was my college mother and offered to take care of me.

My elder brother was waiting at the bus station. He had arranged for me to attend Olivet, after my rejection at Government College. Bube would not have me in his school. I was a radical. My brother convinced Papa I was attending the best school in the West. He was an undergraduate now at the University of Ibadan, the topmost university in the country. He was the chief adviser to Papa. He was the eldest child and had shown great leadership qualities. He always showed interest in our welfare. He was a good brother.

As we approached the university gates, I was determined to go to university. I did not know about the existence of a university. I was going to work as a clerk after leaving Government College. We were not prepared for higher education. Now I was inspired. Goddy knew about university education. He had secured admission into UI to pursue a career in medicine. His uncle was a lecturer. I did not know, and we never discussed careers. Now I was happy I journeyed to the West.

I stayed with my elder brother in his hall of residence. We ate together in the hall restaurant. For one week, I almost felt like a university undergraduate. We attended social events, and visited many places in the university. The zoo was particularly interesting.

These things were new to me. It was my first time outside Ughelli and Warri. I was in the West, the seat of the Western Nigeria Regional Government.

The journey to Oyo was rather different for me. The road seemed nicer than the one from Benin to Ibadan, but the mini-lorry was full of marketwomen. I was the only student in the vehicle. My brother made sure he gave appropriate instructions to the driver. I was to be dropped in Olivet. It was right along the main road on the outskirts of Oyo.

As I entered the school gates, I saw Veronica in the distance. She seemed to have anticipated my arrival. The returning students had settled down in the school before the new students arrived. Veronica hurried to the gate. She directed me to my house.

The beds were varied. There were wooden contraptions, double bunks and single bunks. There were wrappers on beds, bedsheets, and plain mattresses. Clothes littered everywhere. Everyone secured his box around his corner. Some used chains, and some used theirs as pillows. Everyone spoke in Yoruba. The dormitory was noisy. This was to be my new dwelling place. The place was untidy. I sat down on the bed. It was a spring bed, with a few missing springs. They had been substituted with wooden planks. I sat down on the bed and went into contemplation. I found myself in my dormitory in Government College, Ughelli. All the beds were made, and we were in line for the Saturday inspection. It was the ritual there. We all wore well ironed khaki uniforms. Our boxes and personal belongings were in the locker room at the end of the dormitory. We all spoke the Queen's English. We had well-groomed hair, neat and civilised.

Suddenly I was jolted out of my dream world. The bell rang with a cracking bang. It was lunch time. The students grabbed whatever utensils they could lay their hands on. Some carried knives; some just had forks, plastic cups, and plastic plates, plates of different shapes, sizes and colour. They were going to eat. Nobody spoke to me. I was completely lost. I just followed.

We arrived the dining hall. It was narrow, and congested. I saw Veronica in the distance. She was chattering with her girlfriends. They all seemed happy. They all wore white shirts and blue shorts. Some wore trousers. They were the seniors. I wore coloured clothes. We were new students, and this was our first

day in school. Was it possible I was meeting the school in its normal state of existence?

The head boy rang the bell and there was quiet. He gave out a series of instructions in Yoruba, and interpreted a few of them in English for the benefit of 'kobokobo'. 'Kobokobo' was a term used as reference to non-indigenes. It meant those who did not understand the normal language. Eating was an art. Most of them used their bare hands. Others manipulated knives directly into their mouths. Rations were varied, but the food was black. It was called *amala*. The soup was called *gbegiri*. I stepped outside the dining hall. I had seen enough. How could people, normal people live in these conditions? Were they trying to kill themselves? It was unthinkable for students to put knives into their mouths. How could they put their hands into their mouths? What if the black objects they put into their mouths contained dangerous chemicals?

I felt a hand on my shoulders. It was Veronica. She had been studying my mood.

"What is the matter?" she asked, surprised I had not eaten.

"I want to go home," was my reply. I had seen enough. I was not going to be subjected to anything like this. Life was too precious to throw away. I wanted education, not dehumanisation. How could I eat under such conditions? The dormitory was not habitable, I thought. I must return to Government College. That was where I belonged.

Soon I was standing at the gate with my luggage.

"Where are you going? Or have you just arrived?" the principal asked as he drove his grey Zephyr sedan into the compound. He was coming into school from town. Mr Layan had a soft spot for Government College, Ughelli boys. He gave automatic admission to Government College boys. He trusted their upbringing. He was a friend of government colleges.

"I am going to get my things from Ibadan," I lied.

"Welcome to Olivet," he said with a warm and welcome smile. I felt bad. This principal loved me. My former principal in Government College wanted to beat me.

I did not go to Ibadan to see my brother. He would not hear of my disapproval of one of the best schools in the West. He had personally recommended this school to Papa, and secured the

admission himself. I went straight to Warri. The journey took two days, and I arrived late the second day. I waited till the morning to confront Papa. He was aware of my arrival but not the reason for the quick return.

Papa regarded me for a few minutes. He was surprised at the reason for my return. I told him I wanted to look for better schools. "In the West they teach in Yoruba the local dialect," I lied.

Bube was sitting behind his desk when I entered his office. I was confident. I had made the 3rd best result in WASCE. I expected he would welcome me into the HSC class with open arms.

"We don't have any space for troublemakers like you," he said, trying to sound friendly. "My school will not condone outlaws like you. Our school is full," he said emphatically. He wanted no more of the pleas from me. Papa iced the cake.

"I have no money for Government College. It is too expensive. Olivet is what I will pay for. Your scholarship has expired," he reminded me. The game was up, and I was soon on my way to the West again.

The cathedral was a magnificent building. The Principal conducted the morning devotions. We usually had morning service before breakfast. Classes followed after. Veronica was pleased to see me back. She knew I tried to go back to Ughelli. I told her I just changed my mind about that. I wasn't going to earn the name outlaw. Bube was wrong. I was a shy, respectful, loyal and dedicated student. I believed in GCU. Now I was in Olivet, and was enjoying every bit of it.

I soon got out of the culture shock in Oyo. Oyo was a town to explore, and my friend Jide knew the town well. I was a science student, and took Pure, Applied Maths and Physics. There were two arms in the lower sixth form. All science students sat in one class, and I sat next to Bidemi. She was a brilliant girl and was preparing for a career in medicine. We took Physics together.

Mr Oluremi taught us Physics and Pure Mathematics. As he entered the class, he greeted the whole class in Yoruba, and proceeded to teach the class that day in Yoruba. I was outraged.

"I don't speak Yoruba," I protested boldly.

"Okay, but I hope you will try and learn the local dialect."

It was unbelievable. It was an offence to speak incorrect English in GCU. This was to affect my studies. I skipped almost

all his classes. Jide and I used invaluable time exploring the local hotels in town. We also smoked just behind the bushes by the school fence.

Eddiba was from Benin City. He was a science student, and started his school career in Olivet. He knew Veronica and other students from Midwest State. We fraternised. Eddiba soon joined Jide and I in our explorations. We shared valuable information on the latest arrivals in the brothels, and the going rates. Eddiba and I always smoked cigarettes across the school compound. I always had a generous supply of *Benson & Hedges*. It was a popular brand. Eddiba always knew he would get from me.

Eddiba and I patronised the same brothels. Dr Bambri knew us well. We visited the hospital at least once a month.

"I have gram positive diplococcic germs," I would announce shamelessly. She would have finished her prescription even before I finished saying the popular sentence. As soon as I settled to state what brought me before her she would start writing. She knew it was gonorrhoea. It was popular. She always gave us injections. Dr Bambri was an Indian lady. She worked at the Baptist Hospital and was a very kind lady. She would advise against visiting prostitutes. We had no alternatives. Sometimes I would take gifts of syringes to her in appreciation of her understanding. We never knew about prevention. Science was not vast in those areas.

We preferred the cheaper houses. Elephant House boasted of a variety of women. They were mainly from the middle belt area. There were Ibos, and Midwesterners. They were mixed ages, but mostly middle-aged women. They only took 2 shillings, and Elephant House was concealed amongst other houses. You could go in unnoticed. It was our popular spot. Chime was working in the Mid-Western Bank in Dugbe. It was close to Elephant House, and it was our final resting place before going back to Oyo. Goddy was also in Ibadan. He had secured a job at the University Teaching Hospital as a laboratory science technologist. He worked in the laboratory. My friend was in Ibadan, so was Kofi. Kofi was a student in the University of Ibadan. He was in the preliminary class, studying for a career in medicine. I was unaware of the opportunity. I only knew about HSC. My journey to the West was the turning point in my life. I was exposed to the various

opportunities and chances.

Goddy always came to Oyo to visit me. We spent almost all weekends together. He also came to check out our Oyo spots. He liked Bisi, our local hero. Bisi was beautiful. She was about 20, and was dynamic. She taught us many new exclusive things grown-ups knew. We liked her.

Esther was the youngest of our customers. Goddy had discovered her. She was expensive. Esther was light-skinned. She had long hair and had an athletic build. She was about 16. Esther's smile was guaranteed to send shivers down your spine. Her amazing white teeth revealed the innocence of a young maiden from the riverine areas. She was the toast of everyone who stepped into Independence Hotel. People lined up around the bar, waiting for the chance to take their turns with Esther.

I was patient. Esther never came out of the room. People just met her, sometimes between customers. She was busy. As soon as I got the chance I was in Esther's room.

"I wan see you."

"5 shillings," Esther said without even looking at me. She lay on the bed, and her silky body radiated the sweet fragrance of a beauty queen. I was thrilled. In a few seconds I was dressing up. I had been too excited to stay long on Esther. She seemed to understand. As if in self-pity, Esther stretched out her hands towards me. She was holding a 5 shillings note.

"Take your money," she said smiling. Her eyes were fixed on mine. "You dey go school?" she asked.

"For Oyo," I said. Then she gave me a shocker.

"You nor go go back today o," she said. "Go wait for me for bar. I don close."

I joined Goddy who was waiting for my assessment of the new bride. We were to go home together. He was curious to see what was to happen next. Why did Esther ask me to wait for her?

Esther sat with us and announced her love for me. She wanted me to spend the night with her at the hotel. She made sure we were drunk. We ate chicken and rice. She turned down every offer of service from the customers who interrupted our discussions with demands for service.

"My brother come from village I don close," she told everyone. Esther was from Bendel State. She stopped in primary 6 and was

working for her upkeep. She was taking care of her mother and siblings. She made a lot of money. Her beauty guaranteed that. I liked her. She was nice to me and always gave me pocket money. I spent all my weekends with Esther. She would stop seeing customers on Friday. Saturday and Sunday were reserved for me. I was her husband.

The effect of the Nigerian Civil War was not felt in the West until the occupation of Midwest by the rebel forces. The news about the war was frightening. We heard of carnage, and I had to see my parents. There were stories of killings of civilians of Hausa and Ibo extraction. There were stories of looting and conscription of youth into the rebel army. I was afraid. As I prepared to board the lorry for Ibadan, Mr Layan waved me goodbye.

“Go well, my son. All will be well.” His words were comforting. I began to cry. I wanted to see Papa. Had he joined the army?

“Come down, everybody,” barked a fierce-looking soldier as our vehicle came to a halt near Ibadan. It was a military check-point.

“Come down.”

“You, you, and you,” a soldier ordered, pointing at me and two other boys. We were fair-skinned and were young boys. They were looking for escape soldiers from the war.

“Yamiri,” the soldier shouted. “You, what is your name?”

“Okafor,” came the unfortunate reply from one of us. He was immediately singled out and taken to the nearby bush.

“And You?”

“Ugherughe,” I said creatively. I realised they were looking for Ibos. I was Urhobo, but did not speak the language. I understood Urhobo. We were never required to communicate in Urhobo, and had lost the speaking skills. Esther was Urhobo. She had tried to speak in Urhobo with me whenever she needed to confide in me. I always answered in English.

“You be yamiri?” the soldier asked, motioning on me to join Okafor in the bush. “No, I said emphatically. I be Urhobo.”

“Sing Urhobo song,” he ordered.

I sang well, and danced as I enjoyed the melody. It was a song by the popular Victor Olaiya. It was a song in Urhobo, and everyone knew the song. Only these soldiers didn't.

“Okay, go.”

As we drove out the gunshot from the bush sent chills through my body. Okafor had been shot. It was a narrow escape for me.

Okafor was on my mind as we approached Ijebu-Ode. Everyone talked about the occupation and liberation of Bendel State by the federal forces. The rebel forces had threatened to occupy the West and liberate the West also. Many people were neutral. It was a war between the Ibos and the Hausas, we thought. Ijebu-Ode was quiet even at 5 pm when we arrived. The road was deserted. Most of the bridges on the road to Benin were barley bridges, built by the Federal/Nigerian army to replace the bridges blown by the rebel soldiers as they retreated from Ore. Only few vehicles travelled on the road.

The journey to Ore from Ijebu-Ode started at about 11 pm. I sat at the back of a goods lorry. There were four other passengers on board. They were coming from Lagos and going to Warri. I was extremely lucky. One of the passengers was a soldier. He was going to see his family in Sapele. He was in training in Lagos, and had not been drafted to fight in the war. On the way, he talked about gallant soldiers during the war. The commanding officer was a war hero. Skinny frame, and smallish built, he had a loud voice, and when he barked orders, even the vegetation responded. He was well known in the town for large drinking parties. He was also a sociable person. The soldier had a lot of regard for Col. Tegban. He was well known in military circles. He had risen to the rank of a colonel within 2 years of joining the army after the School Certificate Exams. It was because of his bravery. He was fearless, and when he spoke, Generals listened.

We were going to spend about two hours in Ore. The driver needed to take a nap. He had driven throughout the night. The road was narrow, and each bridge crossing was an adventure of some sort. I told my new soldier friend I was going to see the commander at Ore. His eyes popped. I was an ordinary school boy. He was curious and accompanied me maintaining some distance.

As we approached the gates of the command headquarters, guns were drawn. Fierce-looking soldiers in full combat uniforms approached, ready to shoot if we were intruders.

“Stop! Who goes there? Advance for recognition,” came a stern

and unfriendly voice.

"I want see Tegban," I said laughing. I had been drinking through the rough journey. My soldier friend stood by, looking on. He hoped to rescue the situation if we got into trouble.

"Stop there," the guard soldier screamed. Two other soldiers seized us for a search. Suddenly they motioned to us to go in. The Colonel had been observing the drama. He was laughing.

"Eric, you nor dey fear?" he said chuckling.

"Where you dey go? Ifiastic tell me say you dey Oyo. Nar yesterday e comot go Warri," Tegban asked between sips of brandy. He must have been drinking, because the bottle was half empty.

"Who be dis?" he asked pointing at my companion.

"My friend," I said. "E dey go Sapele. Nar Sapele boy. He just join soja."

Col. Tegban made sure we were stone drunk before we left his house. Tegban had been a year my senior at Government College. He was a friend at school, never bullied and loved to help out. He was kind, generous but troublesome. He left in 1965, and immediately joined the army, and was drafted to the war front. He showed exceptional courage, and had risen in ranks. He was a rascal even in school, although he had the looks of a weakling. He was now a dreaded colonel in the army. He fought the war gallantly and was a favoured officer of the Nigerian Army.

We arrived Sapele at night. It was littered with corpses. There had been a house-to-house cleaning of rebels, and the town was a complete shadow of itself. Everybody stayed indoors. Elderly men and women were seen in the streets carrying out essential duties. My soldier friend dropped on the other side of the ferry. He met a cousin who took him home.

I was united with my family. My younger brother was glad to see me. I didn't need to come, he explained. It was too dangerous.

My father spent the next two weeks teaching us the basics in Urhobo language. It would have been his fault if I had been mistaken for an Ibo boy. He taught us many songs too. It was the popular way of differentiating the natives by the soldiers.

Back to school, I entered the classroom in the middle of a class. Bimbo rushed out to the door and embraced me. She held me tight and started crying. I was stunned. Bimbo had missed

me so much. I never spoke to her, although we sat together. I never stayed in class, I never even noticed her. Now she missed me. I was ashamed of myself. I was a cold and heartless boy. The class clapped. They were pleased to see me. Many people died during the war. I was the only one who ventured to Bendel during the war. What was I thinking? I vowed to be nice to Bimbo. I wasn't going to take on a girlfriend anyway. I had Esther.

The scenes of war made me religious. I needed to know more about life and God. It was God who saved me in Ibadan, I thought. I responded to the publication in the newspapers, and registered to become a Rosicrucian. I studied the monograms and carried out the experiments there. At this time, Goddy was reading fantastic books about life after death. They were authored by Marie Corelli. He always told me fascinating things about the afterlife. He knew about the reasons for evil, and knew evil persons just by looking at them. Sometimes he frightened me.

I read many of the books myself. Tuesday Lobsang Rampa was my favourite author. He talked about the subject also, and seemed to confirm my doubts about the existence of the traditional God in churches. Lobsang Rampa talked about a Master. I was interested in his teaching, but not ready for that level of spiritual discipline. I was very comfortable with my lifestyle and never wanted to delve into the unknown. I did not want anything to disrupt my lifestyle. I loved *Guinness Stout* and palm wine. I did not want to wear maroon robes and reveal witches and evil people on the highways. I liked to be myself, just the way I was. I was now a Baptist by conscription. I was in a Baptist school.

I did not pass the promotion exams into the Upper Sixth form. I had only participated in three exams. I skipped all the mid-term tests, and based on the average of six exams I failed. Based on three exams, I just managed to scale through. I was promoted on trial, because I was from Government College, and I had excellent WASCE results. The Principal was willing to take a risk on me. I was not interested in pure maths and physics. The master spoke mostly Yoruba in class, and did not know how to communicate.

Mr Rolili was our new Mathematics teacher. He taught us applied maths. He was a young man in his mid-twenties, and

had just graduated from the University of Ibadan. He had made a first class. He was a simple man, and had a simple approach to mathematics. Every problem was reduced to the natural laws of gravity. I caught it like wildfire. While my classmates clutched slide rules in their back pockets and pencils in their unkempt hair in a supposedly maths crazy fashion and argued answer routes with Mr Rolili, I watched in amusement at the simplicity of modern mathematics and saw the ease of life through this man. He greatly inspired me, and rekindled my interest in the subject. I applied the Rolili simplicity to physics and pure mathematics. I now attended classes regularly.

We were drilled for three weeks in lessons on modesty, politeness and courtesy. We were required to put up happy faces and clean uniforms. We learnt hospitality, and practised table manners. There were demonstrations, and samples of modest discussions at table. We were forbidden to speak in the local language. Government College, Ughelli was coming to Oyo to play a friendly football match with Olivet. My friends and classmates were coming. Staffy was in the team. He played full back. I was now a hero. I was from GCU. Olivet had a good football team. I was the local medicine man. I carried the voodoo charm to the pitch. Whenever I wanted Patrinton to score a goal, I moved towards the goal post of the opponent. Very few people knew I was from the opposing team. I did not carry the charm to the pitch. It had not been revalidated for this match. We played a goalless draw.

The 1968 HSC exams were different. It was a new syllabus. I was not one of the best. The principal never counted on me. I submitted my script after 45 minutes. It was physics practical. The supervisor was mad.

“Come on, go back,” he said in a subdued voice. I had followed the instructions faithfully. I did exactly what we were asked to do. Curiously I went through every single step again. The supervisor was our first physics teacher. He knew I was not a serious boy, but I was not going to spoil his grades. I dumped my answer sheet in front of him. We had one hour left to the end of the paper. My mates were excited. They all got the answers to the first and compulsory question. They had been helped along the line by the teacher who spoke Yoruba. The remainder of the

exams went along the same lines. I was honest in my answers. I never forged an answer. We knew how to pass exams in Government College.

I spent part of the holidays with Esther. I was leaving the West for Warri. I had finished my HSC. It was time to work. Esther gave me a lot of presents. I travelled to Benin with Eddiba. He invited me to his home. I was now his pal.

In Warri, Papa was proud of me. He wanted me to start working. There were 9 months left before I was to enter a university. I was now a fully grown man, and he detailed me to go to Lagos and shop for Mama. Mama was now a merchant. She sold clothes, raw tobacco and potash. She also had a lorry. Papa nicknamed the lorry "Fear Woman". It signified the power of women.

I knew Lagos well. Goddy had taken me on several weekend outings to Lagos. We patronised Gondola Night Club. It was populated by young girls from Warri and Benin City in Bendel State. It was the hot spot in Lagos. Bruddy Gabis was our host most times. He was an electrical engineering student at the Technical College in Yaba. He had his own apartment and always took us to the hot spots in town. He knew Lagos well. Gabis could make a way from Yaba to Lagos Island and back within an hour. He was of Ijaw extraction. He also smoked Indian hemp with Goddy. It made them high, but I never indulged in the habit. I still resisted all entreaties to smoke Indian hemp. I finished my shopping on time, and made a lot of side profit. I resold part of the consignments purchased wholesale to some customers who were not as big as Mama. I took the difference, and we had a splash in Gondola.

I dispatched the driver to Warri.

"Tell Papa say I dey go school go check my HSC results. I hear say the result don come," were my final instructions as I boarded a bus to Ibadan. I would spend some time with Esther who made sure I got enough to drink.

I staggered towards the school chapel. It was a Friday, and Assembly was in progress. Suddenly Bearded Show screamed as he ran out with other students to meet me at the gate. I was carried shoulder high, straight to the chapel. I had been drinking, and alcohol oozed out of my breath. Bearded Show was now in

Upper Six. He was a great friend, and was excited. I had made the best result in Science. I was the only one who had all papers. They were good grades. The principal looked at me with a smile and puzzle in his face.

“I don’t know how he made it, but we are proud of him.” he said as the assembly closed. That year, results were generally bad throughout the country. The system changed and the examination pattern was different from past years. We were all taken unawares. Because I did not prepare well, I had used residual knowledge and combined it with honesty.

Most of my classmates made incomplete papers. Not up to 20% recorded success in three papers that year. There were no exams in the East. There was war, and all students had been drafted into it. I soon got a job, teaching in a private school in Warri.



Addico

You could hear noise and laughter by the gate. It was unguarded, and you could come in and out of the premises at will, and anytime you wanted. It looked as if there was an election going on. People clapped and applauded jokes. There were groups of people talking about almost every subject in town. It was mostly about the social networks in the town, and the latest in fashion. As I approached I began to wonder if I was in the right place. The compound was beautiful. The blocks wore fresh paint. They were storey buildings. I knew where to go. I was drilled during the interview for the job. The rooms were labelled.

I stepped into an arena of commotion. I moved into the raised platform unnoticed. Boys and girls sat on desks. It was the 2nd week in school. They had not started learning. My eyes caught her eyes. She had been observing me keenly. Her eyes practically followed me around as if I was an object for study. She had carefully diagnosed me. I must have met her approval.

“Quiet!” she screamed. “Teacher in class.” There was an instant compliance with the no-noise order.

“My name is Eric Ikogho,” I said clearing my voice. “I am your new Physics teacher,” I said with a smile, putting my books and a packet of *Benson & Hedges* on the table in full view of the students. I was a chain smoker.

The class broke into a mild laughter. It was music to their ears.

“Wetin be Physics?” a light skinned girl said with a hiss.

“If you write in that language in your final exams, you will come out in failing honours,” I said with a wry smile. The joke was on her, and the boys roared. I continued in pidgin language, as if to compliment her.

“My journey rough today. I enter one Morris Minor,” I started.

“Felele my driver dey drive as if he dey craze.”

I described in great details how I got to school that morning. It was easy to know how fast especially in relation with motorbikes and the various cars we overtook. We covered a distance of 5 miles in 10 minutes. It was an interesting story. It also gave the girls time to study their new teacher, not because I was the teacher, I was the new kid in the block. Some of the boys were definitely older than me. I could have called them ‘bros’ the local way of referring to an elder brother, instead of their names. In the end I said we travelled at a speed of 5 miles in 10 minutes, and by extension 30 miles/hour. It was easy. We talked for a few more minutes. Then I wrote on the board Physics. We had just covered the first chapter on velocity in the physics textbook.

“It’s easy then,” exclaimed the fair-skinned girl smiling apologetically for her earlier remarks. “I will take Physics.”

They were fifth form students, and had not been taught Physics. It was a private school. Midwest College was a relatively new school in town. The proprietor was an educationist and was the principal of the school. He recruited me during the long vacation to teach mathematics, additional mathematics and physics in classes 3 – 5. It was a busy schedule. I was not experienced in teaching, but I knew the subject very well. Mr Marable loved me as his own son. His son also taught in the school. He taught Biology.

Most of my friends got teaching jobs. Staffy taught in Our Lady’s High School in Effurun, while Johnbull taught in Urhobo College, Effurun. We all taught physics and mathematics, and were all around the same location. We usually came to school with one taxi, and went back home with the same taxi. Felele was more than a taxi driver to us. He was a pal, and in and out of work we took drives around town with him. We had a perfect understanding. He was introduced to us by Staffy who knew him well. We were all close friends, boys. By now we lived in Igbudu, a suburb in Warri. My mother had completed her first mud building and a one-storey building. There were only four rooms on the ground floor, and four rooms on the upper floor. She lived in 3 of the rooms, and reserved one room for me. I was a teacher now, a grown-up man. My elder brother had two rooms reserved for him. My younger brother and the other children slept

in the room, most of the time. My elder brother was in the university, and came home only on vacation. My room was in the back of the house. I had complete privacy, and Mama never saw me unless she wanted something from me. It was usually to help her read a letter.

The sun was up in the sky, and brightened the busy street with soft heat. The air smelt fresh, and the light wind extracted silent whistles from passers-by. I was standing in front of the gate. Felele had passed and waved at me. He usually collected Staffy, and Stella, the dark-skinned beauty from the West. I always sat near Stella in the car. Staffy and I sat on both ends of the back seat. Johnbull sat with Wilfred in front. Felele was a jolly good fellow. We were always happy at the close of school each day. Our routine was almost fixed.

Nene was standing on the other side of the gate with Blacky. Blacky was the light-skinned girl from my first day at school. She and Nene were the gang leaders in the school. They were popular girls, pretty. They sported coloured clothes under their school uniforms, and usually went out to town after school. They were heavy spenders.

“Where Addico dey go?” The chuckle in Blacky’s face told me the rest of the story. They were referring to me. I was Addico. I taught Additional Maths. A motorbike pulled by them, and Blacky jumped at the back. She was obviously familiar with the driver. She glanced in my direction as she waved goodbye to Nene. It was clear their discussion centred on me. Nene looked in my direction and began to move closer. She was smiling, trying to present a friendly look.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” she said stopping right in front of me and taking my books from me. “I go follow you go home,” she said, without giving me an option. Perhaps she lived nearby, I thought.

“Hope there’s no problem?” I was asking when Felele arrived. Staffy was sitting in his usual corner and Stella sat in the middle. Nene immediately jumped into the car.

“I am going with Eric,” she announced to a surprised crew, as she settled in the seat beside Stella. She made way for me. The car would not be comfortable, so she raised herself, and settled on my laps. My heart thumped so hard, you could hear the beating

of drums from within. Staffy chuckled. He thought I had taste. She was an extremely pretty girl. How did I strike so early? We were barely one month old in the school. Johnbull and Wilfred were the last two to enter the car. Urhobo College was a few yards down the road.

The ride was quiet. We could not afford to crack our usual jokes. They were usually on Stella, the only girl in our company. There was a student in our midst. We had to behave like good teachers. Stella was curious. She did not ask questions but I could see from her occasional side looks, she was not happy I was dating my own student. I was uncomfortable.

Nene spent the whole day with me. We ate lunch together, and I learned about the name Addico. They all thought I was a genius. They liked my classes, and were determined to get pass marks in mathematics. It was compulsory. Nene lived at the end of Odion Road. Her father was a warlord and was dreaded in the town. His name smelt trouble. You could not dare visit any of his daughters. It was an abomination. Nene was an outgoing girl, and had many suitors among officers of the Nigerian Army. She spent long periods at the war front, and usually came back with a lot of money. She always took good care of me.

I was sensitive to her exploits. It was dangerous for me to be seen with an officer's girl, but she protected me. I was always introduced as her cousin. We always talked about education. I talked about my dreams for a sound education, and my ambition to go to the United States to get a good education. Gradually she began to focus on her education. Nene started to study. She spent most of her time in my house, and began to be identified with my company. Her mother was pleased. Her daughter no longer wandered aimlessly at the war fronts. She had a responsible boyfriend. Nene was a good cook also. Her tribe was noted for good cooking, and sometimes she would bring cooked food for us to eat. Her mother usually made sure we had delicacies. It was believed in the local circles that women from her tribe knew how to get to a man's heart. It was through food.

As I came home late from school one day, I met Mama in a very bad mood. It was easy to know when Mama was going to blow out. I had gone over with Staffy to his mother's place after work. We usually helped his mum sometimes with her food

business. She sold fried plantain and beans by the roadside, and we had to eat her food almost every day in order not to incur her displeasure. She loved us. Mama was already at home when I walked into the compound. She must have come home early.

“Wetin be this?” she screamed as she stormed into my room and threw the plate of food on my table, almost spilling the contents. “I nor wan see you with that Itsekiri girl again,” she said at the top of her voice. I was confused.

Mama usually talked in very loud tones. She usually shouted, and we were always embarrassed when she got into that mood. The whole neighbourhood gathered as she raved on. I was angry.

“Pigeon dey marry only one wife. No person go fit charm my pikin,” she would not stop talking. As soon as Papa rode in with his cranky white bicycle, Mama narrated the story to him, and Papa came charging to my room.

“Papa, let this be the last time you ever come and tell me how to live my life. I will follow whosoever I want and whatever tribe she may be. Do you understand?” I was screaming as Papa stood in front of my door. He was astonished. His son was warning him in full glare of compound mates. I was angry, and showed it. I took it out on my dad, and not my mum. Papa just left, as I banged my door shut. He said nothing. He left. You could see shock written all over him.

I went to bed early. I had eaten in Staffy’s place, and Mama threw away my delicacy. Pigeon tasted like chicken. Nene usually added large prawns and fresh fish in my dishes. There was hardly any space for gravy. The assortment of assorted meat, fish, prawns and vegetables was guaranteed to send signals to your taste buds. Nene actually reached my heart with food. Now I was not eating anyone’s food. Not Mama’s. I was upset.

The night was silent. Even the night owl seemed to be fast asleep. It was the festive season, and the weather was nice. A half moon peered out of the sky as if observing things. Suddenly, I awoke with a stir. Someone was knocking gently on my door, trying not to wake the neighbourhood.

“Who is there?” I said a little louder than him.

“Papa.”

“Wetin again?” I asked, a little apprehensive. Had Papa come to scream? He wouldn’t contemplate the cane. I was too old for

that. I could even overpower him in a wrestling match. What could he possibly want? It was 1.00am. I opened the door. Papa was standing in front of me. He was still wearing the clothes from work. He had not changed for bed.

“Sorry for waking you up this night,” he said as he made his way to the chair in my room.

“Where is that your fine cigarette?” he asked. Papa liked smoking some of my fine cigarettes. Sometimes I bought jasmine flavoured cigarettes from Chellarams. I had a good supply of choice flavours. He stretched out the packet and motioned me to take one also. I lit his for him. Papa looked into my eyes and cleared his throat.

“My son, I am proud of you and your achievements. You are my dreams come true.”

The words startled me. I had braced myself for a showdown with Papa. I was going to fight for my freedom. Nobody was going to tell me who to associate with. Papa talked for about two hours. He told me in great details how his younger brother terminated his career and eloped with an Itsekiri girl. He thought they were dangerous. He took me through his childhood, his failed education, his marriage and religion. He was a Catholic and had to resort to Mama’s religion because of children. He vowed his children were going to be university graduates. That would complete his dreams. He hoped I would turn out successfully. I had been recording successes.

Papa apologised for trying to shout at me. He hadn’t actually shouted. I shut him down. Papa was proud of my actions. I stood up to him.

“Papa, don’t worry” I said. “I know what I am doing,” I reassured him. “Have I ever failed?”

Papa took a few more sticks of cigarettes from the packet. He really liked them. Papa was my friend. He was training me and he knew how to do it. I respected him and helped him with his trade anytime I had the opportunity. I lay awake the rest of the night. I knew I had to succeed. I had to be a graduate.

Nene explained to me after school the next day that she waited a long time for me, and had to hand over the food to my younger brother when it was getting late. Mama had not come from the market when she left. Our relationship continued after that. It

went even deeper. We were fond of each other. All the girls in school knew about us. She had defined her territory.

My family at this time had expanded. By now there were three other brothers and two sisters after my elder brother and I. Mama had seven children, and we all lived in Mama's compound in Igbudu. She had the ground floor of one of her houses dedicated totally to her shrine for worship. She was still a pagan, but now I understood why she was a pagan. She had made those sacrifices for us to be born. Papa had told me in great detail how she had to succumb to the worship of the deity in order to make us live. She was a good person, and I did not see any reason why she would be burnt in hell fire for such a sacrifice. I also did not believe that her actions would rub on me as the biblical saying went. I was a free spirit, responsible for my own actions. I had learnt about karma in Lobsang Rampa's books, and believed in life after death. You came back because of God's mercy to accomplish failed tasks, and achieve new ones. It made sense. I remained a free thinker.

Goddy was still in Ibadan. He had secured admission into the University of Ibadan to read medicine. He lived on the university campus with his uncle. Broody Gabis was always in Warri. He had returned from Lagos and spent most of his time in Burutu. He was born there and his parents lived in Burutu. During weekends, Broody would come to my house in Warri. Mama's compound was close to the Warri Cemetery. The Indian hemp merchants were concentrated there, and Gabis was their customer. Once I accompanied him to the joint. I had to be counted among my peers, so I got myself a wrap.

I finished a whole wrap of the substance. I was curious to experience the boldness it was expected to give me. Instead I wanted food. It made me hungry and slightly tipsy. Both conditions were far from the terror I thought I'd become.

"Why una dey take *igbo*?" I queried. "Nothing dey. Now I dey hungry." We hurried home to a large bowl of garri. It was the feeling expected. I soon became a regular hemp smoker, just for the hunger experience, rather than the boldness. You did not see clearly when you were on dope. You were different, and I always wanted to be accountable for my every moment experience. I never got addicted.

We patronised the local night club every weekend. Lido Night

Club was the hot spot in town. A live band always played pop music and rendered highlife pieces. I was interested in music. I had been a friend of Fire-Flys dance band, and was a good MC during their performances. I could speak slang. King Keton always called guest artistes when he wanted to relax. He was the band leader, and played in Lido every night. I was his guest star, and sang mostly James Brown's compositions. I sang and danced well. James Brown was my hero. I could glide and sing. Broody Gabis would introduce me to the expectant audience, and as I sang and danced he would gather the money placed in front of me in acknowledgement of my talents. We usually made enough to have a good night out. We were always lucky. A few of the club girls who did not make any hit would invite us over to their apartments. It would be our lucky day. We were their small boys, and they would give us a treat. That year two of them made it to the finals of the Miss Nigeria pageant, they came 1st and 2nd runners-up.

Tebifa was a young girl. She was 14. She was a good dancer. As I finished my debut, she came to my table. I was sitting with Gabis, and we were a little drunk.

"I like how you dey dance," she said. "Come, follow me dance."

We danced for the rest of the evening and drank a lot of beer. She drank beer and never stopped until she was drunk. She never left my sight. We bonded instantly. Tebifa followed me home that night and stayed on with me in my apartment. Mama liked her. She was talkative and would cry at the slightest scolding. She liked being accepted for who she was. She was too young to attract any whiteman from night clubs. She would go out in the morning to look for customers. She always came back with money.

"Dee, I get plenty money today o. Hold am. We go enjoy for Lido today." She always gave me the money to spend on our behalf. Her money was ours. She was open. She respected me with all her heart, and never dared to disagree with me. I was hers and she was mine. She could dance, and would only dance with me.

We were high. So was the beat. It was a big show and the dance floor was filled to capacity. We never left the dance floor. There was no need; we had no table or chair. The Afro-beat king was playing at Zena Night Club. It was a new club, and always hosted bigger events. Lido would not contain Tela Handsome

Puti. The Puti girls wore skimpy dresses, and exposed just about enough to titillate the cheering crowd. They danced well. So did Tebifa. Tebifa was a very good dancer and combined the traditional Ijaw dance steps with the grace of Afro beat. Soon she was the star attraction.

“Oga wan see you.” It was the voice of the organiser. He was well known, and it was a privilege to be noticed by him. Tebifa returned a few minutes to the end of the show. She had been with Handsome Puti himself, and was proud to tell me. I was not angry. I depended on her kindness and just let things go.

The following day I packed my load to leave. It was going to be a long but exciting journey. “Buy your ticket quick,” my brother advised. He went through the steps. I was going to the North. Ahmadu Bello University offered Engineering. I wanted to become a mechanical engineer. I admired cowboys. I couldn’t wait to hang spanners in my back pockets, and screw away in an engine room. The mechanical engineer was my hero.

I boarded the train in Ibadan. The journey was eventful. It took three days to get to Zaria. We stopped in every train station and sometimes long enough for us to explore some of the towns. I was in the third-class coach. There were mostly beggars and northern herdsmen in the cabin. They were simple people, friendly and compassionate. I drank throughout the journey. I was going to the North for the first time.

As we arrived Zaria Terminal, I saw Obukohwo and Johnbull. They had boarded the train in Lagos. They were in second class. I never went to the central coach. It was the restaurant. They spent most of their time in the restaurant. I was not briefed by my brother. We found our way to Samaru together.

I was offered admission to study Civil Engineering. Kohwo was admitted to study architecture, and Johnbull got mechanical engineering. It was a disaster. Kohwo and I wanted to study mechanical engineering. We did not know about civil engineering or architecture. We were going to be second-class citizens, we thought.

My elder brother was excited with news of my admission. Civil engineers worked in the Ministry of Works. They built roads and bridges, he told Papa. They make money. They establish construction companies. My brother was always there at every

rite of passage to steer me in the right direction. He watched over my back and was making good decisions for me, but this time I was determined to make my own decisions. I was going to be a mechanical engineer. It was the life I wanted to live.

“Okay,” he finished. “In the first year you all study the same subjects. It is in the second year that you decide which branch of engineering you wanted to specialise in.” I must have been terribly naïve. Nobody told me what engineers did, or the many branches. I just knew that the study of maths and physics led you to becoming an engineer, and engineering meant mechanical engineering.

It was the long vacation and my elder brother was spending it in Warri. He was my role model, and taught me how to be responsible. We spent time together, and even courted the same girls. We were now friends. Everybody treated me like a university undergraduate now. Even Mama. Mama wanted me to accompany her to every big event. She liked to announce her new University Boy, and got a fat chance one weekend.

Mama’s brother was recuperating at the Eku Baptist Hospital and we took the opportunity to visit him in hospital. She was going to visit her relations in Okpara Inland after that and I accompanied her.

We waited for sometime at the park in Eku to board a vehicle to Okpara Inland. There were very few vehicles heading to Okpara. Most of them carried passengers to Warri. It was a more busy route. We were just a handful going to Okpara Inland. A young lady appeared on the opposite side of the road where we were standing. She was gaily dressed. She wore a very expensive gold coloured lace wrapper with a light yellow blouse to match. The blouse was decorated with fine pearls that reflected the rays of the sun. The sun had been set up for this meeting, because it seemed to follow the dress. Her shoes were light brown. They were high heeled shoes and made a stately statement when she walked. She clutched a small handbag and an expensive headgear. She was either a rich girl or a visitor to these parts of the country. Suddenly she began to smile as she crossed the road. I looked at Mama. She had been observing the girl, and I thought she knew her. She approached slowly as if counting her steps not to hurt the ground on which she walked.

“Eric!” she screamed as she stood right in front of me removing her sunglasses to reveal a light-skinned face adorned with brown powder and clean eyes.

“Esther!” I shouted, as we embraced each other passionately. “Wetin you dey do here?” I asked, her gaze locked in mine. She was smiling, and it was clear we knew each other very well. Mama was observing the mild drama. She was glad. This was a beautiful girl. She knew her son, and she was going to our town. She was in luck.

“I dey go Okpara Inland. I dey go see my papa.” She was now looking at Mama.

“This na my mama,” I said introducing Esther to Mama. “Mama, look my friend for Ibadan.”

“Migwo, Mama,” Esther said, kneeling down in full view of everyone. The space in front of her was clean and dry. Mama rushed to her rescue, raising her up.

“Welcome, my pikin,” Mama said showing off her new command of English. “Who be your papa?” she enquired.

Mama knew the family well. Esther’s family lived in the next street in Okpara Inland. Her family was well known. She had come to attend the local festival. It was also the time for exchange of gifts to family and friends in the village. The festival was held every ten years. It was to be held at the weekend, in three days time. Mama wasted no time in patronising Esther. We went with her to see her father, and Mama took her to our house. She showed off her son’s friend. Mama invited Esther over to Warri. She accompanied us to Warri. Mama bought her wrappers and head-ties. She was the daughter-in-law in her dreams.

“Born for my pikin o,” she pleaded with Esther. I was shocked at her demands. Esther to bear my children? It was not going to happen, I thought. The good Lord would not allow it. Did Mama know she was a prostitute? Esther stayed with me in my apartment for three days. She was in love with me, but had to work in the hotel to make ends meet. Nobody knew what she did for a living, and I was in no mood to spill the beans. I reserved that for the proposed day of marriage.

Nene did not visit much, and met Esther only once. It was easy to explain she was a cousin from my village. She was one year younger than I, and we were not planning to get married.

We were customers. Nene was preparing for her WASCE, and did not go out much. She only came around for a few tips on mathematics. I taught her at home sometimes.

Esther travelled with my mother to attend the festival. They looked like mother and daughter. Mama really liked Esther. Was she replacing Nene with her? She never wanted me to date an Itsekiri girl. They were too dangerous, she thought. Esther was an Urhobo from my village, and was from a good family.

Mama carried on as if I had commissioned her to find me a wife, and for a while I thought I was going to get hooked on an unwanted merchandise. School was my saving grace, because I soon got admission to the Ahmadu Bello University to study Civil Engineering.

Most of us got admissions into universities except Staffy. He got a job in a local football club. It was a government-owned football club, and Staffy was a pioneer member of the club. One of our acquaintances, Stella, who taught French at Our Lady's High School, Effurun did not get admission that year. She had not done her Higher School Certificate exams, and remained in Warri. She was from the West, although her parents lived in Warri. She was a 'Warri girl'. Stella was a good and friendly person and we were all very fond of her. She had a good command of the English language and spared nothing to show her skills at the use of English. She was also slim, dark and pretty. Sometimes her smiles distracted me, especially when she capitalised on her white and well-formed teeth. She was easy to look at.

Soon we were all gone to our various destinations. We were young adults now pursuing our careers.

|| Eight ||

Little Joe

Goddy did not go to higher school. He worked briefly before gaining admission to the University of Ibadan for a preliminary course in Science. Now he was to start his studies in medicine at the university. He wanted to study medicine. Agbetegbe was a primary school classmate. We were in Debua Lesson together. He attended St Malachy's College in Sapele, and now worked in the Immigration Department in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Lagos. His elder brothers were all in the United States, pursuing various disciplines. Goddy and Agbetegbe were friends, and visited each other regularly, and Goddy spent his holidays with Agbetegbe in Lagos. He had a one-bedroom apartment in Lagos. I knew his house. I had been there a number of times, and we sometimes went to the night club together.

Goddy and Agbetegbe were making plans to travel to the United States. Agbetegbe worked in Immigration and knew how to go about it. I was excited. My dreams of being a cowboy engineer were taking shape. I was heading for the US too. Soon, Agbetegbe secured passports for Goddy and I. We were to travel to London and then arrange for an easy passage to the United States. Agbetegbe had concluded his own plans. He was leaving in a week. We would join him later.

I packed my bags carefully. Papa was excited; I was going to the university. I was excited; I was going to the United States. Papa thought my excitement was the Zaria connection. It was not. I was going to join Goddy to put finishing touches on our plans to travel abroad. Papa gave me money for my school fees in Zaria. It would be enough to buy a ticket for my emigration to the United States.

"Why are you leaving so early?" Papa asked.

"I want to settle down on time," I lied. We were going to see

Agbetegbe off at the airport. He was travelling in two days time. I was already behind schedule.

The airport lounge was busy. Travellers dragged their suitcases and travelling bags in different directions. There was excitement everywhere. There were people of different nationalities. The white men were also different. Some had square faces. Not all of them had long noses. I stared. The confusion was apparent in my facial expressions.

“That one nor be Oyibo,” Agbetegbe explained, “na China.”

I had thought that all light-skinned people came from England. Americans were supposed to appear as cowboys. This was a Chinese couple. Rather funny, I thought. We did not sit close to the white men. We were not equal we had been told. They lived in exclusive quarters and had dogs to chase us if we got close to their houses. I had a few dog bite scars to show for my dare-devil attempts to pick fruits falling from trees in their compounds.

We stood by the wire fence in full view of Agbetegbe as he boarded and sat at the window seat. He was facing us. He held a glass of wine. Soon the plane jetted off. Agbetegbe was off to London. That night we went to Gondola to celebrate his departure. It was our turn next. My funds would be enough to buy my ticket. Agbetegbe would be waiting with details of our housing and work. It was all planned. There were homes ready to take us in as Commonwealth citizens. I could even go to a better university there, I imagined. We came home in the morning. We had had one too many to drink and slept most of the day. In the evening, we decided to visit a friend of Goddy's. He lived in the next street. He was a friend from Goddy's last job in the hospital. He was from the Midwest. He was Urhobo.

Goddy knocked on the door. The compound was a noisy one. His friend stayed in a large two-bedroom flat with his parents. There was a car parked outside. It belonged to the landlord who was also an Urhobo. It seemed a popular house.

“Come in,” said a voice. We were ushered into a large sitting room. There were two men discussing in the corner of the room. They had their backs turned to us.

“Bozo,” Goddy said.

“You know my guy?” he asked him.

“Stanley Parker,” Goddy said, calling me by my pet name. You had to have one to be counted as a ‘happening guy’. I was meeting him for the first time, but he had been told a lot about me.

“Stanley Parker, meet Delicate Akpakpasimaga,” Goddy said introducing him to me.

As I said, “How na?” I seemed to have suddenly stirred the hornet’s nest. The two men turned to face us. Papa was staring at me in utter disbelief. I started shaking. I had enough to shake for from the large volume of alcohol I had taken the previous night. Now combining it with fright, I was producing music.

“What are you doing in Lagos?” my father asked.

“I came to take my pre-syndicate examinations results from the West African Examinations Examining body,” I said, maintaining some balance. I was hardened enough. The long sentence did it. It was a brilliant response, and you could count on anything academic to get out of trouble. Papa believed in education, and my answer was related to high sounding education. He was impressed.

“Good, my son,” he said trying to understand what I meant. “When are you going to the university?” He seemed to emphasise the university. His cousin had to know his son was going to university.

“Tomorrow,” was my quick response, and the shocker to follow.

“I will see you off to the train station.”

I was trapped. That morning I went to the train station. I wasn’t giving up on my dreams, just delaying the departure date. Papa had also checked my finances, and gave me some more for food on the long train journey to Zaria. Delicate Akpakpasimaga and Goddy saw me off. My papa and his cousin were also there as if to ensure I was on the train. Papa helped with the purchase of the ticket.

The three-day train journey to Zaria was not as boring as I anticipated. I was in 2nd class this time, and spent most of the time in the restaurant. Goddy was lucky, I thought. He had no father to police him around. How was I to know I had a cousin in Lagos? Was it a coincidence? Was it destiny? Why did Papa come to Lagos? Why did he not tell me he was also going to Lagos? Did he know I was planning to run away to London? Why? Why?

“Stanley Parker,” came a loud voice. The train made so much noise you had to shout to be heard. It was Johnbull. He was on the train. He sat in the same compartment as Oslo. They settled into the empty seats in front of me. They jolted me out of my trip with destiny.

“Staffy told us you left Warri last week,” Oslo said. We thought you were already in Zaria. We travelled together to secure admissions into the university. I had not told Staffy I was planning to go to London and I was not going to tell these two now.

“I went to see Goddy in Lagos. He is preparing to go to school,” I said. “When did you leave Warri? I asked, trying to change the subject.

We had a good time. We talked so much about our dreams; I began to like the idea of staying in the university. I would stay, and go after my first degree. It was going to be three years. No big deal, I thought.

We soon settled down in school. I was in Akenzua Hall. It was a temporary hall of residence at that time. There were many students from Government College, Ughelli in Ahmadu Bello University. A few of my classmates from Olivet made it also. Admissions had been easy that year. The students from the East had not applied for admissions. They usually had very high scores from their HSC results. They were still fighting the war.

I kept to myself all the time. I went to the cafeteria alone, and did not socialise much. I liked the feeling of being unique. I kept very untidy hair, and it was beginning to have dreadlocks. I looked like a one man riot squad. Oslo was in Akenzua Hall, too, and we soon got together. He was my roommate, and we both isolated ourselves from others. We smoked. Mainly cheap cigarettes. We smoked *Target*. It was a local brand manufactured in Ibadan. We became identified with it. We liked showing off our lack of respect for the rule of law. We never queued up to get our meals. We just walked to the counter and were served. The other students seemed to give us that special concession. It was as if we were dreaded terrorists. No one came around our table when we ate. Many times we would refuse to submit our meal tickets. I always wore baggy blue jeans trousers, and a Fulani cattle-herder top dress. It exposed part of my midriff, and exposed my bare skin for the most part.

I entered the class. It was my first class. The lecture theatre was full. There were only a few seats at the back of the class. Lectures had begun. The lecturer was smoking and talked in between puffs. He was a Yoruba man, who had graduated from an American university. He was my kind of man.

As soon as I stepped inside the class there was an ovation, as if they expected a celebrity.

“Little Joe!”

My classmates clapped and applauded. I was a unique kid, just like the cartoonist sketched me in the magazines. Little Joe always wore a dress exposing the lower abdomen. He never had enough cloth to cover his body.

“Little Joe.” I was little Joe forty-three years later I am still Little Joe. The name stuck. It was appropriate. Little Joe was known by the cafeteria attendants, and by the hall wardens. It seemed to guarantee me access into anywhere I went.

Freshmen were being recruited into the various clubs and associations. The Bendel State Students’ Association had invited us to a meeting. I did not attend. Also the Urhobo Students’ Association because it did not interest me either. I preferred operating alone. During the weekend, Yelwa Club, an elite club of the Ahmadu Bello University organised a welcome dance for freshmen. There was a live band, and I liked attending night parties. I went in my traditional attire, the little Joe outfit. I was an instant hit. Everyone invited me to his table and offered me drinks. I settled on the same table with Oslo. There was a young boy with us. He was younger than we were. He had been admitted into the Prelim Science. He was a friend of Oslo. Gbenga was from Zaria, although his father was a Yoruba from Ilorin. His mother was Hausa, and he had been born in Zaria. He liked to identify with us.

We left there very drunk that night. I always liked to be alone when drunk. I never wanted to be seen vomiting or talking incoherently. I soon escaped and made my own way home. I was discovered fast asleep in front of Amina Hall. It was the Women’s Hall. I was half undressed. I had used the field in front of the hostel as a bathroom, and had gone to toilet, without tissue paper. I was carried home by good Samaritans. Ox Blood the 2nd and Deji had cleaned me up and taken me home. I said nothing as we

went home. I did not stagger as I walked home. I managed to maintain my balance while walking. Deji was the Captain of the Pirates Confraternity. Ox Blood was from Bendel State. He knew me. His twin brother was a year my junior in Government College.

"You must come and join us," Ox Blood said the next morning. I was grateful for their assistance. The idea was carried.

At the recruitment interview, many fierce-looking men sat on the floor. They wore red outfits, and carried swords. Many of them smoked, and drank beer. Some drank unlabelled drinks. They looked like murderers, but I was not intimidated. The captain, usually called Capon, observed me carefully. He offered me Indian hemp.

"Smoke *igbo*," he ordered.

"*Igbo* nor dey trip me" I said turning down his offer. "E nor get anything wey e dey do for me," I said, as if I was talking him out of the habit.

"Okay. Drink our concoction," he said offering me a metal cup. The fluid in it was dark. Although the lights in the room were red and dim, I could still see their faces and the contents in my hands.

"I nor fit drink wetin I nor know. Nor vex," I said, trying not to be offensive. I had offered myself for interview. I was supposed to know better. "I like beer," I insisted, handing over the cup to Capon.

"Give the niga beer," he said, offering me a bottle of beer. There was instant singing. I liked their songs. They were pieces from the musicals on 'Treasure Island', a book we read in school. I had had a role in the play. It was a yearly drama presentation by students of Government College. I had visited Kongi Club in Ibadan with Goddy. Wole Soyinka was my personal hero. He stood for what I believed in, and he and others were the founders of the Pirates Confraternity. I danced to their song, and I was asked to join the others sitting down. I was admitted. Oslo came in next, and passed the screening test.

Gbenga accepted the wrap of *igbo*, took a swipe at it and started coughing. He thought he had to show off hardness. As soon as he accepted the cup of concoction, Capon screamed orders to Long John Silver.

"Throw him overboard."

Gbenga was beaten and punished. He was asked to kneel down while they read out the riot act to him.

“Go and tell them that Pirates are not hemp smokers. We do not get drunk. We maintain self-discipline, and must be ourselves at all times. We stand for justice and fair play. We do not show off what we do not have. No vagabond is a Pirate. No rascal is a Pirate,” Capon said as he ordered Gbenga out of the room. He was not accepted into the confraternity. I had passed because I maintained my identity. I wasn’t going to do something because I was ordered to do it, but because I wanted to do it. I was unique, so were the other Pirates. We were pretty the police squad on the campus.

Gbenga, Oslo and I were even closer as friends. We soon formed a tight bond of friendship. We were called the notorious trio. We occupied the front pages of every campus magazine. We were regarded as mini terrorists. Life was good.

Oslo was a student of Architecture, and was always occupied with school work. He sometimes slept in the studio. Gbenga was in the foundation classes, the preliminary science courses. He wanted to study for a degree in Medicine. Gbenga was outgoing and many times he would invite me to hang out with him in the Catering Rest House, Zaria. His mother was the manager, and we had our meals there anytime we wanted. There were good cooks in the Catering Rest House, and they had very delicious food. I spent a lot of time in the Rest House with Gbenga. Gbenga’s elder brother was also a student of Ahmadu Bello University. He studied Accountancy in the School of Business Studies in the Kongo Campus of the university. It was located in another part of Zaria, and Gbenga’s elder brother, Henry shuttled the two campuses in a motorbike. It was his motorbike, and Gbenga knew how to ride a motorbike too.

I learnt how to ride a motorbike. Gbenga taught me, and we always used the bike to comb Zaria City. By this time we had become well known in the brothels in Zaria City. We did not spend too much money; many of the women bought us drinks. I had a lot of money. I always paid for the drinks and cigarettes. I was a wealthy student. Within the first session in the university, I had been awarded a federal government scholarship to study Engineering, and within two weeks I was to have another

scholarship from the Midwest Government for Engineering. I had a third scholarship from the Ethiopie East Local Government. I was a government child, and the school fees I had paid was refunded to me. It was much. I had plenty of money to spend. I never forgot my plans to go to the US. It affected my stay in Zaria. I was only there temporarily, and I did not need to attend lectures. I spent a lot of time in bars in Zaria City.

One day, I stood by the roadside, trying to maintain my balance from a hangover from excessive drinking. I had just left Jomai's house. She was the pretty young girl from Maiduguri. She was my new girlfriend in the hotel. A Volkswagen beetle car pulled by my side.

"Hop in, Little Joe." It was my Mechanical Engineering lecturer. He offered me cigarettes. "Where are you coming from this morning?" He knew. He was coming from his own girl's house at that time. "You must hurry and freshen up. We have a lecture in 2 hours." I hadn't planned to go, but I was sitting beside the lecturer.

"Okay, Sir," I said filled with smiles. I appreciated his love and fellowship at this time. It was not a master-student relationship. We were pals. He drove straight to his house, and went straight to the kitchen. Mr Broderick brought out hot coffee, and poached eggs. He toasted bread, and served the meal with fried meat in stew sauce. I was in luck.

"Eat, my friend," he said. We ate together and talked. He was single, and I was welcome anytime in his home to eat or drink. He was a student's man. He was very clever, and taught well. I soon became his good student.

Goddy travelled to Germany. He did not go to London as planned. He had a relation in Germany who helped him get into a school. He wrote a letter to me from Germany. He had his own apartment, and worked. He was driving a car to work. Instant hit. It fired my dreams more. I was going to London to join Agbetegbe.

I did not concentrate on my studies the first year in school. I was USA-bound. There was a vacation holiday scheme to Britain, a student exchange programme. It was to cost 75 British pounds. It was an exchange programme for Nigerian students to holiday in Britain, engage in vacation jobs and return after 3 months. It

was perfect for me, and I enrolled for the programme. I already had a passport. I had enough money to pay for the trip. We were required to pay 25 pounds to buy basic travellers cheque. It was no problem, I thought. Papa would give me. I was on scholarship. I was yet to collect payment for my scholarship awards from Bendel State and Ethiopia Local Government Council.

I failed in two subjects. It did not bother me in the least. I was headed for USA *en route* London. My elder brother was unhappy with my results. It was unusual for me to have such results. He had heard of my exploits, and discussed the options with Papa.

"Papa, we are required to acquire intensive engineering training in England. It is the Industrial Training Scheme," I told Papa. It always worked. I counted on the high sounding words to blow his mind before asking for 25 pounds to accomplish my dream trip.

"My son," Papa said. "You failed your exams. What training are you going for?" I never counted on that. Papa looked unhappy with me. He may have known of my attempts to go on holidays. My elder brother was aware of the programme, and had advised Papa against allowing me to go to London.

"I did not fail, Papa. I am going to the 2nd year," I said frowning. Papa was calling me a failure, and I had to stand up for myself. "It's a re-sit, and I will do the exams when we come back," I replied, trying not to show the anger and disappointment on my face.

"You can't read in London. Go next year." Those were his final words. He would not hear of London again.

I was miserable, and unhappy. I did not speak with my brother for weeks. I knew he was responsible. I got a teaching job in a primary school for the vacation. I could not make the deadline for the trip, and my money was refunded to me. Papa did not know of the refund of school fees. I had a feast that holiday. I spent the latter part of the holiday in Benin. It was my first time in Benin. Staffy was playing football for a club in Benin. He had his own apartment and was given a Vespa motorcycle. I cruised around with his bike. We would make weekend trips to Warri from Benin. We no longer had to cross the Ethiopia River with a ferry. The Sapele Bridge was completed, and was in use.

The re-sit examinations were easy. I knew the subjects well. I

was only uninterested the first time. I found myself in the 2nd year. In December the following year, I was to be in final year. The prospects excited me.

I became more focused. The Pirates Confraternity helped me a lot. We learnt self-independence and uprightness. We were also discreet. Nobody knew what we did, but we were a most disciplined group of young men who were non-conformists. We never followed the crowd, but our hearts. During the initiation ceremony, we all took blood oaths, and swore to be honest, upright, and defend the defenceless. We swore to defend the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and not to be involved in any unscrupulous activities that would undermine human integrity. We did just that, and anyone who turned the privilege into an advantage was thrown overboard. He was removed from the confraternity.

The students had misconceptions about the activities of the Pirates Confraternity. No one had first-hand information on who they really were, except what they had been told by non-members. The different Scripture Unions had given them enough information on our destination to hell fire. Many feared us. Some would not even come close, once they knew you were a sea dog. They knew I was a sea dog. They were pretty sure the Notorious Trio were sea dogs. Terrorists, yet they looked on to sea dogs to stand up to erring union leaders, or high-handed officials.

It was the beginning of the new session. The lines were long. There were arguments at the counter. People talked in loud voices. As we entered, there was an uneasy calm. Voices came down. We were unaware of any special qualities we had to stir such a change of climate in people who were hungry and wanted to eat. We approached the catering assistants in charge of ticketing and serving meals. The menu was garri and soup. It was black, and had a funny odour. It was stale. The rainy season had dampened the store and the garri had gone stale. I knew *eba* very well. It was my staple.

“What’s this?” we said almost in unison throwing the plates of food on the floor. As we walked away cursing, the cafeteria erupted.

“We nor go gree o, we nor go gree.” The students went on rampage. They demanded the removal of the VC. We accused

him of trying to kill us. He had given us poisoned garri. The riot took a different turn, and soon went out of hand.

Col. Bakogun was posted to Zaria. He had joined the army when a corporal manhandled him in Ughelli. He was a teacher in Government College, Ughelli, and Oslo and I knew him well. We decided to spend the day with him. The campus was rowdy, and we had better things to do. We were in luck. Bakogun had a party, and we were welcome. We had a nice time. We stayed with him for three days, and we partied every day. It was fun for us.

We returned to see the gates heavily barricaded. There was a lorry-load of combat-ready soldiers along the streets of Samaru, armed, as if going to war. Students blocked all entrances to the university, but stayed calm. Bakogun dropped us in a military vehicle. It was painted green. As we approached the gates I waved my hands in the air. All I wanted was for the students to open the gates for us. We were returning students. As if we had given an order to commence the war, the students started hauling stones and dangerous implements on the soldiers. Then the order came. As the soldiers charged, we ran in different directions. Everyone was on his own. I headed for the fence, and as Sule struggled to part the barbed wire fence, I dived in a clean Rambo style, and was out of the compound. Suddenly I heard a scream. A soldier had caught up with him, and was hitting him with the butt of his gun. He bled profusely, but I was not going to play nurse. I ran for safety. In spite of the bottles of beer I had consumed, my eyes were crystal clear.

The Trio reunited at the fence. We headed for the Catering Rest House. Within twelve hours, the university was closed down. School strikes were not popular at that time. We seemed to have inaugurated one in ABU, and the pirates were pinned down as the cause. It was just an innocent behaviour, and no one was held responsible for the demonstration by the students. Soldiers looked for students they thought were the ring leaders everywhere, even in train stations as we found our way home to our different towns. The trains were filled with students chanting war songs. Soldiers had brutalised students. Yakubu Gowon was to be held responsible. He was Head of State. At a time when the nation was fighting a war, students' unrest was not a welcome event. We were going to be punished for it.

I got into the cricket team in ABU. I knew how to play cricket. It was played in Government College, and even if I did not excel in GCU, I was good enough to be in the team. We were not many who played cricket. The captain of the team was an ex-student of GCU. He recruited me. I was always an opening batsman. I could stop balls and frustrate bowlers. I never scored beyond 4 runs.

We went to play cricket with Kano Club in Kano. We beat them. We returned at night, and ran into a party. It was organised by a popular elite club in the university. Membership was reserved for rich men's kids. The gate fees were high. Tebete and I approached to pry. We wanted to see what was going on. Gbenga ran to me. One of Handsome Puti's dancers was looking for me. He was excited. I had no time to change from my cricket outfit. I had to enter. Usually I was exempted from paying at gates. I did not know why the privilege; perhaps it was to prevent us the 'notorious trio' from disrupting their parties. I just walked into the arena, and saw her.

She was radiant, and was the lead dancer. Handsome Puti showcased her, and she danced to everyone's delight. She had an electric waist, and moved with vigour, grace and elegance. She had white chalk marks all over her face as if disguising the chocolate cream face with smooth curves without success.

Soon she finished dancing and rushed to where I was standing.

"Eric, where you dey since? I dey find you," I was confused. I was trying to figure out who she was and how she knew my name.

"Tebifa, Tebifa," she said. My eyes lit with excitement, but everyone gazed at us. I couldn't grab her, and she restrained herself. You could see the lust in our eyes. We wanted badly to get on each other's arms. We couldn't. Handsome Puti was around somewhere smoking. He was in charge of all the girls.

Tebifa was now one of the ceremonial wives of Handsome Puti. He had conscripted her into his dance band and married her. She remembered me. She cherished the times we spent together. She had liked me so much. She gave me money and asked me to study well for my degree. She was now a dancer, and enjoyed her profession. I went home drunk that day. It was a very happy reunion with a lost girlfriend. I was happy to see her.

I had lost touch with her and wondered what had been happening to her until that day.

I visited the local brothels frequently with Tebete. We usually brought our game home to the campus and offered services to waiting students. We charged 6 shillings, and paid the lady 5 shillings. It was a deal. The ladies were usually pretty Fulani ladies with good statistics. They could take on 6 boys for the evening. We had a client base, and the ladies looked forward to our patronage. In the morning, we went with our game to the cafeteria. We were proud of our women. We would serve them food and see them off. We treated them like undergraduates, and they appreciated our business.

Melemu was an orange seller. She usually came in the company of groundnut sellers to Akenzua Hall. They always stayed in front of my room. Sometimes they would come inside the room and take a stick of cigarette and smoke. *Melemu* (Orange seller in Hausa language) called me her husband. She was eleven years old and smoked like an adult. She sold oranges to me and sometimes gave me free oranges.

Melemu was our pet. Soon she began to teach us how to speak Hausa. She taught us basic Hausa. We were glad anytime she came around. We learnt how to speak Hausa, usually the basic greetings and day to day communication. We employed some of it during our exploits. Our teachers also included Melemu's friends who usually accompanied her to our hostel. Some sold groundnuts, while the others sold sugarcane or kola nuts. They spoke Hausa to us, and taught us whatever we wanted to learn. They behaved like adults. Melemu was married, but had not gone to her husband's house. She had a picture of him. She carried it on business trips.

"I was an orange seller," I told Melemu one day.

"Haba, Megida, how you go say you sell orange?" she asked. *Megida* literally meant 'the owner of a home'. It acknowledged one's status as a highly placed person, and she was unprepared to believe I ever went through the same corridors she now passed through.

"I sell orange. I go school," I said, trying to sell the schooling for business idea to Melemu. Melemu believed in me. I was kind to her, and gave her gifts. I would make up her costs if she had a

bad day. Melemu always sang and danced for us in appreciation. She spent a lot of time trying to read the kindergarten books we bought for her. Melemu was a brilliant girl.

I shelved the idea of going to London. It was a few years to becoming an engineer. I stayed with civil engineering. There was a wider variety of careers in civil engineering. It was a more adventuresome field than mechanical engineering. By now I had gotten over the cowboy syndrome. At the end of the second semester examinations I did not go to Warri. I secured a vacation job in the department. I was a computer punch card operator, and I worked under the supervision of Dr Posu Dara. Dr Dara was from Bendel State. He hired me to assist him in his research work. The pay was good, and was enough to have a good time. I stayed with Gbenga in the Catering Rest House in Zaria. Gbenga took me to work sometimes on his motorbike.

Gbenga's uncle, Tafida, was going to Lagos on a business trip. He was going to be away for three weeks. He had a Ford Cortina car. It was not new, but drove well.

"Look after this car for me," he told Gbenga. "We were about to set out for Samaru on his motorbike. "Make sure you warm the engine every morning," were his final instructions.

Gbenga took him to the train station, before we set out for Samaru. The next morning, Gbenga got into the car and started the engine. He had never driven a car before, but could drive a motorbike. He sometimes rode his bike to Kaduna. I could ride a bike also. Gbenga engaged the gear, and moved the car a few yards, and switched off the engine.

"This thing is not difficult," he said, ambition written all over his face. He became restless. He wanted to drive the car. The grounds around Catering Guest House were clear. There were no trees around the compound, except around the fence. Gbenga drove the car around the compound, changing gears just like the motorbike. It was easy. He drove for a while, and parked the car. He even reversed the car a few times. It went well, and I was impressed. I woke up the next morning to find Gbenga absent from the house. The car was gone. Gbenga's mum was not aware of the arrangement and did not notice his absence.

Gbenga came in the afternoon. He had gone to the town with the car. He even bought fuel. He waved the car keys at me. "I am

a driver," he announced. "Let's go out."

I jumped into the car, and we drove to the hotels in town. They had to know we had a car. We came back very late at night, drunk and still driving well.

The next day I received my pay cheque. We were in for a swell weekend.

"Let's go to Kano," Gbenga suggested. Kano is a bubbling city. I had never been to Kano before. It was noted for a lively night life. I was instantly excited.

We packed a few belongings, and set out for Kano the next morning. It was Saturday. We drove for about 50 kilometers when Gbenga announced he could no longer drive the car. He was feeling sleepy. He had taken too much alcohol last night.

"You drive," Gbenga said as he pulled over by the roadside. He showed me the basic requirements for starting, engaging the gears, overtaking cars and stopping. "You can drive. It's as easy as walking," he concluded. We exchanged seats. I put the car on the road. It went well. The road was clear for a few miles. There were very few oncoming vehicles, and I did not change gears often. Gbenga was asleep. I drove the car for about 10 kilometres. Suddenly a herd of cows headed right in my direction. They ran in all directions towards me. I was terrified. I stepped on the brakes and accelerator at the same time. The car came to a halt a few feet from perhaps the largest cow in the herd. Gbenga had woken up and watched the drama. He was not frightened. I was shaking.

"Continue," Gbenga ordered.

Not me. I was done with driving. It was my first. I was not too sure I wanted anymore. Not for now. We did not get to Kano. The car developed a fault a few kilometres from Kano. It was on the outskirts. We got a mechanic to look at the car. I had money to pay for his services. It turned out to be a simple electrical fault, but it took four hours to fix. We finally entered the city centre at 12 am. It was midnight, but you could not tell. The town was as new as morning. We had one lady each, and stayed with them until 5 am. It was time to return. We drove around town for a few minutes, just to see a few places, and headed for Zaria. The return journey was smooth. Gbenga drove throughout. He was not tired after the little rest.

Gbenga had an elder sister. She came home usually during holidays. She was at home when we arrived from Kano. Fatima was impressed her little brother could drive.

“You will drive us out,” Fatima ordered Gbenga. She studied Accounting in Kongo Campus of the university. Her friend, Kate, studied Medicine. She was in Samaru Campus. They were good friends and had come to spend the weekend together. They stayed in the Catering Rest House. We lived in the block besides theirs.

That evening we went to the Railway Club. Fatima knew an engineer who worked in the Nigerian Railway. He was her boyfriend. He entertained us and gave us plenty to drink. Fatima pleaded with us to take Kate home. She needed to cook for her friend and was going over to her friend’s place. Gbenga had a better idea. Gbenga went to his girlfriend’s house. She was waiting. Perhaps they had planned to go out, but his sister’s demand overtook events.

We drove to a local night club. The disc jockey was brilliant, and we danced. I never took my eyes off Kate. She wore a light dress which revealed her curves, and exposed her fleshy legs up to her thighs. She wore pink high-heeled shoes, laced near the knees, and clutched a pink handbag. She wore a short hair. Her voice was like music. It came out gently, as if selecting appropriate words before letting them out. She had brilliant teeth, and liked to show them off with her constant smiles. Now I was left with her. Gbenga had his girl. I wondered why she agreed to go out with us. Fatima wanted her dropped at home. Maybe I was in luck, and I was.

Kate and I danced all night. We held each other as if we had been deprived the opportunity to be together. She confessed she had been a secret admirer of Little Joe. She thought I was different. That night she slept in my room, and we became instant lovers. Kate was my girlfriend now on campus. She preferred a discreet relationship, and we always fixed our meetings at night. We would meet in an abandoned faculty building at night and be together. We took care of each other.

Kate tried to make a few modifications to my dress mode and looks. She preferred me as a gentleman, and not the student activist that I looked like. I wore a blue jean throughout my final year at school. I had a white T-shirt with the statue of liberty

painted on it. I painted it. I sometimes wore my cattle Fulani white sleeveless rope dress. It was my Little Joe outfit. I preferred to be different. I had my own style.

Gbenga jetted out of Zaria in the summer of 1971. He had secured a scholarship from his regional government to study in Britain. He travelled to London, but always kept in touch. He was aware of my plans to go to Imperial College after my degree. It was a sudden decision, and took me unawares. By now Gbenga was addicted to Indian hemp. He used it always. I had introduced him to it, although I used it sparingly, mostly in the company of people I had to identify with. It did nothing for me.

Gbenga asked me to send him Indian hemp in London. He could not lay his hands on hemp in London. I cut a square hole in the middle of a Bible and sent Gbenga a large consignment. He acknowledged receipt and was excited. He wanted more. He had made some money introducing the drug to his white boys. It was good business. Why not? I could finance my trip eventually. We made one or two sales, when the bubble burst. Customs had discovered the drug trade, and were looking for Gbenga in London. He promptly warned me and gave me the defence tactics to employ if Interpol came to ask me some questions. They did not come before I graduated from the university.

I met Hauwa at a birthday party in Zaria. She came with her 6-year-old sister. She attended the Teacher Training College in Zaria. She wore a silk scarf on her head. She was a Muslim, a devout Muslim. We became friends. She liked me the way I was. She even liked to show me off to her friends. She visited me regularly in school, but always came with her six-year-old sister as her 'insurance cover'. Her father would not allow her out. He knew about me. Hauwa told her parents. Hauwa and Kate never crossed paths. Kate only saw me at night, and Hauwa stayed with me during the day. One day, Hauwa asked that we go mountain climbing. There were many mountainous outcrops in Zaria. It was close to their house. I wore shorts. Hauwa changed her dress as soon as we were out of view. She wore shorts. She was extremely beautiful. She was a Hausa-Fulani girl, and had schooled overseas. She had large eyes, and always pestered them with make-up. You never missed her eyes. They saw through you, and spoke a language of love anytime she fixed her gaze on me.

This girl could make me blush.

We held hands as we made our way to the mountain peak. From there a good many paths were clearly visible. We must have climbed for about 30 minutes, and had to rest for a while before making our way down. She brought some sandwiches along, and a piece of loincloth. She spread the cloth on the bare rocks and lay there. She was inviting, but too precious for my rough hands. I behaved like a sophisticated white kid on a picnic. I was a gentleman, I thought. I knelt down besides her shining body, and the words came out uncontrollably.

"Hauwa, I'd like to marry you when I finish my course," I said looking down.

She chuckled. "My father would never allow me marry a non-believer," she said, regretting her predicament.

"I am not a Christian, I am a free thinker," I protested.

"That's even worse. My father wants a devout Muslim from my area," she said, trying not to look in my direction. "I am in love with you, but I cannot disobey my father," she continued. Hauwa loved me and wanted me to stay on in the north, become a Muslim and marry her. I was headed for the US. We remained very good friends.

Papa wanted me to work in the works department of the Ministry of Works and Transport in Midwest Region, but I stuck to my dreams. I knew I would be bonded to any establishment I worked in. I had obtained scholarships from three government agencies, and they came on recruitment drives to universities.

The Federal Civil Service came on a recruitment drive to our university. We were many candidates who showed up for the interview. They wanted personnel in many departments. The panel was large. A bespectacled man asked me the questions. He must have been a civil engineer, and asked me questions on design of structures. I knew the answer, but preferred to portray ignorance. I was rude.

"I am writing my final exams in June. The results will show if I am a good engineer or not," I answered pretending to be stressed from the preparations for the exams.

"I don't think this boy wants to work in the Federal Ministry," he said, motioning me to go. The interview was over.

By the time the Midwest government officials arrived, I had

stained my T-shirt with oil. I never washed the T-shirt. It gave the impression of a dirty and unserious boy. That would guarantee me rejection, just as I wanted it. I was determined to fail the interview.

“Why are you not dressed properly?” the chief examiner asked. She was an elderly woman, a top government functionary. The other students wore suits and ties. They were formally dressed, and I stood out as a vagabond.

“Did you expect me to buy a suit with the scholarship that you gave me?” I asked, enjoying my rude remarks. “This is who I am now and for a long time to come.” I truly believed that statement.

A man cut in, “Go and dress properly, if you want a job.”

“Thanks, Sir,” I said taking a gentle bow. The woman seemed amused. I feared she was going to give me a chance.

I left all interviews without a job. I attended several ones with Shell Petroleum, and multinational companies. I had developed a discontent for white men. There was racial discrimination at that time in South Africa, and it angered me. The interviews gave me an opportunity to get one back at them. I told the engineer in Shell.

“I am better than your chief engineer. I am black and very proud,” I told him during the interview. It was my popular song by James Brown.

I was working on my dissertation for my final year project one afternoon. It was a weekend, and I was getting late in my submission. I was a good draftsman. A local consulting engineering firm came to make a presentation to the class. They were recruiting civil engineers, and had just established the first indigenous consulting practice. My classmates gathered in front. A bearded man spoke to them. He wore white shorts and held a camera. He assured them his firm was the foremost engineering firm in the country, and they were going to derive maximum benefits working for him. I heard all this, but continued with my drawings. I was uninterested. As he passed by the door where I was standing, the presenter stopped by my table.

“This is what we do in our office,” he said. “Very good, keep it up. You will make a good engineer,” he said as he made his way out.

My classmates followed him out. He was a Yoruba man, and

all the Yoruba boys were eager to work with him.

A few weeks later, I saw my name published on the notice board. I had been selected for interview. Tebete and Louis Brandy were also selected. Brandy had not applied also but was selected for interview. Tebete wanted to work for the firm. I wanted to pursue a higher degree at the Imperial College, London. I wanted to obtain a PhD. I had been inspired by Dr Dara. He wanted me to be a lecturer. I was tipped for a high grade in the final exams results.

I maintained my soiled T-shirt attire. This time I was determined to insult the bearded Yoruba man. Who told him I wanted to practise engineering? Who gave him the right to invite me for an interview?

“Erico, I am Lawrence,” he said, standing up bowing. He held out both hands, suggesting a handshake. I stretched out my hands. He held them tight. He was smiling as if he read my thoughts.

“I know you are preparing hard for your final exams, so I won’t bore you with technical questions. We are a very good firm,” he said. “Good day, Eric.”

The interview was over. I did not even have a chance to say a word. Etteh Aro & Partners was a relatively new firm in the country. I knew about Ove Arup & Partners. I regarded them as British, but this interview was different. I instantly fell in love with this simple engineer. His character impressed and inspired me. He accepted me for who I was. It was my greatest asset. I had been recruited into a firm of professional engineers.

My project supervisor summoned me to a panel. I was accused of plagiarising a postgraduate student’s project. I had better results, and my graphs were exact. It was too much of a coincidence; I was drilled for 4 hours. It was serious, but I never lost my self-confidence. I gave them a lecture on my model and collection of data. It was all original. In the end, Dr Dara who was my supervisor let me go with a smile. He was in charge of all final year projects, and I had to defend my project. Not everyone defended his project.

The exams fever was on, and we spent all our time in the library. The library attendant was a slim dark girl. She was about sixteen years old, polite and pretty. I always met her in the library. Yemisi was a good library attendant, who loved her job. She was

my friend. Asame studied with me in the library. He was a final year mechanical engineering student, and we made a point of duty to use the library for studying for our final examinations. I always brought sweets or chewing gum anytime I came to the library. The sweets eliminated the odour from cigarettes in my mouth, while chewing gums helped maintain a fresh breath. My classmates sometimes complained of cigarette odour when we studied together. It made them uncomfortable. I had a lot of tips on the forthcoming exams, and shared them with my classmates. Many times I showed exceptional understanding of the subjects. I ended my weekends with a visit to Samaru. We always relieved tension that way.

A few days to the exams I fell ill. I was running a temperature, and had discomfort when passing out urine. It was a mild condition. I had been through this condition before. The doctor diagnosed urinary tract infection. I also suffered from malaria. My exams were near, and Dr Swen wanted me to get well soon enough to write my exams. She prescribed an antibiotic injection, and another for the malaria.

A young nurse administered the injection. It was in the university clinic. She wore a white uniform with one blue stripe. She was Hausa-Fulani. You could tell by the way she spoke, and the colour of her skin. She spoke like Hauwa. She must have mixed both vials together. The syringe was large, so was the needle. It was meant for horses, I thought. She tried different spots on my buttocks. She seemed fond of my buttocks because I wondered why it took ages to give the injection. Finally, as if frustrated by the several attempts, she emptied the contents of the syringe into my buttocks.

Suddenly, I passed out. I saw colours more than a modest rainbow, and loud noises. It was as if I was in a metal sheet factory. Whispers presented themselves as loud bangs from a funeral service loudspeaker. I was dead, I thought. I could hear the doctor barking insults on the nurse. She was crying. She had put the contents into my nervous system. What a way to die.

I was helpless. I could neither move nor speak as I came around the third day. It was two days to the exams. Only one examination counted. It was called Almighty June. Make or mar, and you had to write it with others. The only option left for me was to repeat

the final year exams the next year.

I will write, I indicated, motioning with my head. My eyes had not focussed properly, and my mind was partially blank. I was in a hospital bed, under the personal supervision of Dr Swen. She was sorry for the unfortunate mix-up. My condition wasn't going to count in the final results.

I was taken to the examination hall in a wheelchair. The first paper was my best subject. It was a three-hour paper. I managed to accomplish one hour. I had temporary loss of memory most times, and I would be wheeled to the bathroom under heavy supervision and tight security to calm down. Yemisi was always the invigilator. We did not cheat at all, and a nominal supervision was all we needed. The lecturer-in-charge would come and announce the time. Yemisi cried most of the time.

"Please, Eric, try," she would say in the bathroom, pouring cold water on my head. I wrote the much time allowed me, partly because of her insistence. She really cared. Asame sat by my right side in the exams hall. Captain Mutora was Asame's close pal and our mutual friend. He was studying for a degree in mechanical engineering. He was sponsored by the Army and was extremely generous to us. He supported us tremendously. He sat behind me in the exam hall. Capt. Mutora would look at me in a particular way. It was an order. You cannot let us down. Capt. Mutora and Asame were the pillars on which I wrote the exams.

"LJ you can make it," Asame was a close friend by now. He was my library partner. We studied together, and he was sure I would come out tops. He couldn't bear to see me fail.

I was discharged a few days to the end of the final examinations. I was not fully recovered, but strong enough to continue on my own. There were only two papers left. All the previous papers followed the same trend and I barely used two out of the three hours allotted to a subject. I was angry and very disappointed. Who was that nurse that caused me my entire career? Why would they condone incompetence in the name of giving opportunity to the less privileged? Where were the teeming population of Ibo nurses looking for employment?

My name was posted on the departmental noticeboard. I had been offered a job as a pupil engineer in Etteh Aro & Partners. I was to be a Consulting Engineer. Tebete and Brandy also got

employment in the firm. We were the second set of engineers the firm was employing. They were on an expansion programme.

The remaining exams were different. I wrote them with ease. The entire examination was easy. It was just the time factor that stood between me and a first class. There was no consideration for illness. It was called Almighty June.

I left the lecture theatre where we wrote the exams. I had on me my pen and a slide rule. I wore my uniform. I considered the entire situation and began to cry. I cried silently. Perhaps I would have deferred the exams to the next year. What if I failed? The possibilities were frightening. Suddenly I heard the sound of a horn. He had been following me behind for a while. As I looked back, the driver smiled, came out of the car, and lay flat on the ground.

“Epele, Sir o. Oga say make I come carry you.” It was Mr Dauda. He was my new driver. I was his new Master.

The day was June 12, 1972.



Oga Eric

“Oga Eric,” Dauda called. He noticed I was exceptionally quiet as we drove through the gates of Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru, Zaria. We were heading for Funtua. I was the new supervisor of the Zaria-Funtua-Gusau road project.

“Se ko si nkankan?” He was testing my Yoruba.

“Nothing,” I said. “I was just thinking of the exams I have just finished.”

“Congratulations” he continued. “Oga say make I carry you go site. Soil people dey site.” He was detailing my new assignment to me.

I was leaving Ahmadu Bello University behind me. I did not bother to take anything from my room. It was going to be in the past now. Hauwa, Kate, Yemisi, all were in the past now. I was going forward. I did not care about the new destination. I was just going there.

I was in a pensive mood throughout the journey to Funtua. The bitter memories of my ordeal during the final exams swelled in me. My dreams looked distant. This was my comfort. I was accepted by this firm. I was going to be theirs. As we approached the gates of the university from Funtua, Dauda asked if we were going back to the campus, or the hotel.

“Which hotel?” I asked.

“Oga don book place for Catering Rest House,” he said.

“Go straight there,” I ordered. I was a boss now.

I stayed in a suite in Catering Rest House. Dauda shared a room with another driver who carried the soil team to site. There was a team of surveyors too. They stayed in Funtua. I was in charge of all two teams. I did not have to do much; just observe what they were doing. My employers had not detailed me on my job schedule.

“You made it. You passed.” I heard screaming outside my hotel room. It was Kate. She seemed excited. She was worried about me. I was depressed and she knew it affected me so much.

“You made a 2.2,” she said, rushing into my room and embracing me. I did not show any signs of excitement. I was happy I did not have to repeat the exams though. The results had just been released and I was informed I missed the upper class with a few points. It was okay, I thought. I could still pursue my dreams.

Everyone took me as a friend, more like a boy. They were elderly. I enjoyed my new status as boss. I ate and drank without having to pay. I could eat anything. My friends would even join me at a meal, and I would just sign. The hotel staff treated me with so much respect that I thought there was a mistake somewhere. Was this not Little Joe? Were they told specifically to fool me? I was determined to make the best of the treatment while it lasted. The sudden transformation was challenging. I was nice to my new teachers, and they taught me well.

I sat in the front of the pick-up van. It was a new vehicle, and the driver was elderly. His driving annoyed me. He maintained a slow speed of 80 km/ph. I was not cut out for safety. He was extremely cautious apologising and greeting me at every bump on the road. He probably had a warning instruction to deliver me safely. We passed through all the towns in the Western Region. It was more than a geographical instruction. We stopped in choice restaurants. He had strict instructions to pay for anything I wanted to take. I drank a lot of beer. It was to kill my boredom. He only interrupted my sleep if there was any landmark he wanted me to see. It was the journey to the head office. My employer was expecting me. I was to work in the head office under his supervision.

We arrived Ibadan late at night. I was driven straight to the Green Springs Hotel. It was a 3-star hotel in a choice location in Ibadan.

“Oga Eric, nar here you go stay. I go come carry you for morning,” he said as he prepared to leave that night. He checked me in himself. It was prearranged. I had no luggage. I had acquired a few toiletries and some underwear. I had my uniform on. I had to wash the T-shirt before the journey. I was playing

boss now. Oga Eric, I thought to myself. I felt important. Life was good.

My boss was waiting in the office. He was busy writing at his desk when I walked in. There was a man sitting behind him. He was slim and gentle. Dauda led me to Aro. As he stood, I recognised the man in shorts. He stood up and stretched out both hands. He was smiling as he bowed to shake my hands.

“Erico, welcome,” he said, turning to the man behind him. “Meet Etteh.”

Mr Etteh tapped me on the shoulders. “Young man, how was your trip?” he said sitting down almost immediately to answer a phone call. It was a long distance call, and he couldn’t spend more time on the welcome ceremony.

“Fine,” I said, smiling. I was home to people who loved me. This was my family now.

Mr Aro took me round the tables in the office ground floor. He introduced me to all the engineers and draftsmen, as if an expatriate had joined them. We finally settled down on an empty table. It had been reserved for me. I was to work under a bridge engineer. I was in training as a structural engineer. The basement had other engineers, and the accounts department. There was a separate laboratory a few metres away. It was the soils and materials department.

My early life as a structural engineer was eventful and exciting. I was assisted by Mr Saky. He was a draftsman. He was like magic on the drawing board, and he taught me all I later knew in drafting. I asked him questions and would not give him peace until he taught me. He liked my enthusiasm, and spared no knowledge giving me all he had. Soon I was a prolific detailer. That earned me almost an immediate transfer from the head office. I was soon bound for Port-Harcourt.

Mr Onyebuchi was my new boss. He was going to assist Mr Brandy in Port-Harcourt. Brandy was employed and deployed to Port-Harcourt. He was an indigene of Rivers State, and was immediately made the engineer in charge. I was excited. I was going to meet my classmate in Port-Harcourt. I had never been to the East before, and the thought of exploring new frontiers excited me. We made elaborate preparations. We were going to travel by air. I had seen Agbetebe off to the International Airport

in Lagos, but I had never gone near a plane before. I acquired a few belongings. I bought a tape deck with radio and record player. I loved listening to music, and it was portable. It looked like a briefcase. It made up for my lack of personal belongings. The carrying bag contained a small hand towel and my toiletries. I did not need new clothes. I had my uniform.

At the airport, I stayed close to Mr Onyebuchi. He was a frequent flyer, and he assumed I was also a frequent flyer. He assumed I was from an elite family, comfortable parents, and I must have travelled all over the world. I tried not to disappoint him and his views. I watched carefully as we prepared to board the aircraft, and followed, faking confidence. I had chosen a smoking seat, and I was not to sit close to my boss. It was easy.

Mr Brandy was at the airport to meet us. We were checked into the Hotel Presidential, Port-Harcourt. I hardly settled down to my new home when Brandy came into my room. "We are going to the office now." There was work to do. We were consultants to the new State University.

Onyebuchi was a hard man. He worked long hours and always forgot food. He also minimised expenses. We never went to the hotel for food. We ate at a nearby restaurant. He was thorough, and drilled us on a continued basis. We worked non-stop for 12 hours every day. We just had enough time to eat lunch.

"Young man, it's not easy to be an engineer," he would say if he observed we frowned or squeezed our faces, or showed signs of fatigue. "You must work." He never bought us soft drinks or snacks. Onyebuchi only knew how to make us work.

I grew fond of Onyebuchi, and I was designing structures within 2 weeks. He never needed to supervise me. Brandy always created excuses to jet off into town. He was responsible for my social welfare and always delivered the dividends of hard work. Total relaxation. I was fond of hanging out in the bar anytime we returned. I would order a double shot of whisky and ginger. I smoked a big cigar. I was addicted to smoking, and the little packets of cigarettes were a bore. I enjoyed smoking.

Tony sat in our office. He had been in Port-Harcourt, and stayed in the same hotel with us. He was Onyebuchi's friend. He came to visit family and friends. He was a pharmacist and wanted to travel overseas. Brandy and I were entitled to cars. Most

employers offered car loans to fresh graduate employees, and he knew he could entice us with a cheap offer for his car. He wanted to sell it for his travels overseas. It was a Ford Cortina, just like the one Mr Tafida had left for his cousin to take care of in Zaria.

“This young man would buy it,” he told him smiling at me. “Young man, you need this car.

It was going for £400. I could afford to pay with my allowance. I earned £120, and could pay instalmentally. I only used my money for drinking. I shouldered no responsibility then. Mr Onyebuchi knew that well by now. He thought my parents had a lot of money, and I was not working for money.

“Okay,” I thought. I could get a car. Brandy already had a car, and was driving all over the town. Why not?

“Then you should drive me to the airport, and test drive the car for a week,” he said. “I will be back next week.”

How could they have imagined that this little superstar did not know how to drive.

I took one good look at the car. It was a Ford Cortina. I had driven one before on the way to Kano. I was desperate to prove myself.

The drive to the airport was more than challenging. I had a near miss every time I was required to stop. There was heavy traffic, and cars moved at snail speed. I couldn’t do that, and would accumulate some distance before rushing to cover up. I drove with one hand. Tony sat quietly beside me in the front seat. He may have been praying all along, because I certainly did not know how to drive. But he was stuck. We were alone in the car. Onyebuchi had a lot of work to attend to, and I was given a few minutes to familiarise myself with my new car.

Tony was getting late for his flight, and had got used to this new style of driving. It made up for lost time. Finally we arrived the airport.

“You are quite a rough driver,” he said getting out of the car to catch the flight. They had announced boarding, and he didn’t notice I was shaking all over. I had driven in total fright all this time. As soon as he was out of sight, I made my way slowly to a nearby field near the airport. I drove the car around for about 2 hours. I had to practise before the journey back to the office. I parked the car confidently in front of the office and waved the

key. Brandy was around.

“Young man, where have you been?” Onyebuchi queried. He needed me to do some new drawings.

“I took Uncle to a nearby shop. The flight was delayed for 2 hours. They were waiting for a government official,” I lied.

Within a month, Onyebuchi was on his way to Ibadan. He had cleaned up all the designs, and was going for a new assignment. He was a senior engineer, next in command to the founders. He was older and extremely brilliant.

I remained in Port-Harcourt with Brandy. I had been moved to a very cheap hotel along the road. Onyebuchi explained that we were running out of funds, and could not sustain our continued stay in the Presidential. Brandy found an alternative accommodation. It was a guest house. Hotel De Green. It turned out to be a popular hot spot. It boasted of the girls that populated the popular Luna Night Club in the Port-Harcourt City Centre.

A few rooms upstairs were reserved for guests. The other rooms were occupied by single ladies. It was a brothel. They served meals. It was run locally by a businessman. The women paid well.

Tony was gone for about two weeks now, and his return was not in sight. I was in luck. As I parked the car outside the hotel, I would hear running commentary.

“All this small big man sef; we dey here o.”

As soon as I entered the dining room for my meal, at least four ladies would enter and show off their wealth. They would order more than I usually did. One day, I entered the dining hall. It was a little dark in the evening, and I was hungry. I usually took a meal before heading for the night club. It would cut down costs.

“Stanley Parker,” I heard with a jolt. It had to be a classmate or a friend from Warri. I turned to see Stella. She was a sister to my senior in school. She wore a short and tight skirt, revealing her thighs. She wore a red beret and held a red handbag to complement her red shoes. She was smiling as if providing answers to my questions.

“I dey stay here too,” she said, even before I asked the question. “I see you yesterday night. You carry briefcase, I nor sure say nar you at first,” she was moving over to my table as she spoke. The

other ladies looked in amazement. Their colleague knew this small big man.

That night, I gave her a ride to Luna Night Club. Two of the other girls accompanied us. We sat together, and they bought the drinks. We were new neighbours, and they became my constant companions every evening. I would drop them at the club even if I was not going.

My stay was soon terminated. I was called back to the head office. There was work to be done, and I was in the structures department with Onyebuchi. Brandy bought a ticket to Ibadan for me. The Nigeria Airways flight usually went through the Benin Airport, and he routed my trip through Benin. It was a chance to spend some time with my elder brother. He hadn't seen me since I graduated. He was working in an oil palm research institute in Benin.

I sat in the airport lounge sipping whisky and ginger. I was smoking cigar. I wore my rough hair. It had dreadlocks, and I was visibly untidy, but it must have passed in my eyes like sophistication. I didn't care anyway, I was unhappy with the world. The atmosphere was exciting. Travellers clutched their hand luggage and travel documents. I had none. I had my record player-turned bag with me. It contained my essential toiletries. I wore my uniform. It had been faithful to me since I left Zaria. It was my employment trademark. It was just me. I meant no harm, but thought I was exercising my freedom to be and appear the way I wanted, without recourse to how society felt. Suddenly, the arrival of the aircraft and checking in was announced. There was a long line, but I was not in a hurry. I needed to sit at the back of the aircraft. It was the smoking section of flights.

The line was thinning out when a young girl rushed into the checking-in counter. She came chauffeur-driven in a Mercedes Benz, and was escorted by uniformed men to the counter. She looked important or influential, and was lucky to be as beautiful. She was well endowed with hips and bust. She wore sparkling white jeans, and a gold chain belt. Her handbag was very large, I thought it contained all her belongings. Her hair was ornamented. It was long, and fell over her shoulders. She stood at the counter and turned to regard me. I was stuck to my whisky and glanced at her disinterestedly. I did not care.

I had to join the line. I was almost the last man on the tarmac, except for the young lady. I didn't even think she was travelling. I was going to the back of the aircraft. It was the area reserved for smokers on flights. Suddenly I felt her behind me. Her perfume enthralled me. I was not used to perfumes, only the flower types worn by the Fulani women. I made my way to the back of the small jet plane, and sat down on the first seat on the aisle. I was getting nervous as she walked up to my seat at the back.

"Excuse me, please," she said motioning on me to allow her passage. Her diction was impeccable. She must have trained abroad. I stood, allowing her access to the seat. She sat right beside me, and looked me over as if accessing my qualifications to be on the flight.

"Can you please help me with my seat belts?" she said, leaning forward to give me access to the seat belts. She made sure I also had access to her body, touching my hands in the process for effect. My heart pounded. As soon as we were airborne and the non-smoking signs turned off, I brought out my cigarettes. It was *Jasmine*, a highly perfumed brand. It was guaranteed to catch ladies' attention. It had a sweet aroma.

"Excuse me, do you mind?" she said looking at me with a broad smile. "Why do you always smoke? You always smoke a big cigar at the Presidential. What are you doing at the Presidential?" The questions were many. I thought she must have made some research on me.

"I stay there," was my short answer.

"What do you do?"

"Engineer. I work with a firm of consultants," I said trying to look important also.

"Do you like your clothes like this? You have never changed from this jean trousers."

Now I was certain she had researched me. I was beginning to get uncomfortable.

"I like myself the way I am," I said in self-defence.

"I like you too." The words just came out of her mouth. It had to be a joke. What would an important girl be liking in a guy from the Low Income Group of Nigeria. My face collapsed in fright. There had to be more than what was meeting my eyes. I reviewed the situation. She was a sophisticated girl. She was

intelligent, certainly schooled abroad, and rich. Her father must be a big shot. She was beautiful, clean, and polite. Who was I?

"My name is Ify, I am a broadcaster," she broke my silence. She must have observed my discomfort also.

"My name is Eric Ikogho," I stammered as I put out my cigarettes. It was clear this was not an appropriate place to smoke. I just stared into space. I was learning to have a formal conversation, and it was not coming easy. Just then she put her hands in mine. My heart pounded so hard. It was music. She began to smile.

"You can hold me," she said, sensing I was shy, or stupid.

I slipped my fingers through hers. "Do you stay in Presidential too?" I asked, trying to put up a conversation.

"No. My cousin manages the hotel. I have an office there." That settled her importance. Her office was on the same floor as the room I stayed.

"What office?" I asked, trying to relate broadcasting to office work. "I run an advertising outfit there, It's called Ifombu Consults," she said handing me her complimentary card. "I am into advertising, and image building."

We talked for the remaining part of the journey. It was as if she had to keep me busy, to prevent me from smoking. It must be uncomfortable for her, I thought. But why come to my seat? I was getting uncomfortable.

Suddenly the plane ride got bumpy, as the pilot announced our approach to Benin City. "Where are you going?" Ify asked.

"Benin."

"Then I will stop in Benin too."

"Actually, I am going to Ibadan," I said. "I only want to spend the weekend with my brother before going to Ibadan."

"I am going to Ibadan too. My uncle is a Professor of Medicine in UI." I thought she was now trying to show off. My brother was working in Benin. He was a young graduate. He had a car, about all the big man I could boast of.

As the plane taxied to a stop, Ify did not stand as most people did. She remained seated. I got up ready to go. She motioned to me to carry her extra bag. I did not know she expected me to do this. I was to wait for her to leave her seat first before rushing out of the plane. We were the last of the passengers to get down

in Benin. At the taxi rank I played the gentleman. I called a taxi, and motioned Ify to get in. She was to go first. The next taxi was to be mine.

“Where are you going to in Benin?” I asked her. The taxi driver was waiting for my instructions.

“Your place. I am going with you to your house.” She made sure I understood the language clearly, as she shoved me into the back seat with her.

We were quiet on the way home. My brother lived in a dense suburb in Benin. I wondered how she would feel in 2nd East Circular Road. I did not know anyone who lived in the Government Reservation Area. She should be going there. My brother was warm and extremely nice to her. He seemed happy I brought a girl home. It was the first. We did not socialise before now. I was busy building a career, and he was busy surviving. By now my brother was quite a popular man around town. He was called Fabulous by his friends, and the name soon caught up. I called him Fabulous too. We were comfortable. Papa had brought us up as equals. We never knelt down to greet our elders as my tribesmen did. We addressed each other by our first names.

That weekend was a long one. Fabulous treated me like a king arrived from overseas on a special mission to Nigeria. He provided everything for entertainment. Dr Ogiolo was visiting from Isoko. He was a lecturer at the University of Ibadan, and was spending the weekend with my brother. That evening they took the lovebirds out to the Motel Plaza. They were very courteous.

“I would have a club sandwich and a cup of tea. Eric would have the same,” Ify was quick to order.

I had to nod my approval, not quite sure what the order looked like. I really needed my good old beer and roasted meat, but Ify had determined what I was to have. Ify dominated the conversations. She asked questions, and within minutes, she was the centre of attraction in the pool area of the Plaza. Everyone looked in our direction. She spoke the Queen’s English, and had the accent of a British MP. I couldn’t smoke. It was impolite. Ify made sure I treated her like a lady. Dr Ogiolo and Fabulous had a good time. They drank a lot of beer and smoked. They ordered suya from the nearby meat seller. I stuck to tea and club sandwich,

just to please Ify. It was an artificial lifestyle for me, and Dr Ogiolo felt my pain. I was being tortured by this stranger.

Ify was in a hurry to make me a man. By Saturday, I was wearing new clothes. She knew Benin well, and by morning Ify left the house and returned with a whole wardrobe. She went shopping in Forestry Road. The place was a centre for the latest trendy clothes in town. I had a hair cut. Was my brother pleased?

He took one look at me as we settled down to lunch at table. Ify prepared the meals. It was vegetable soup with fresh river fish. The girl could cook. Fabulous couldn't contain his joy any longer. "Thank you, Ify. My brother really looks nice this afternoon." He really meant it. I was okay also with my new look.

Ify and I were in love. We spent the whole weekend visiting the Plaza. We had lunch there. She used the swimming pool every day. She could swim like a fish. She was from Rivers State, and showed off her skills. I was a different person now, although not changed. I missed my real self, but was comfortable being this society man. Dr Ogiolo was also going back to Ibadan, and was driving. He needed my company on the ride to Ibadan, and I agreed. It was a chance to be with real friends again.

We saw Ify off at the airport. She continued her journey to Ibadan by air. I accompanied Dr Ogiolo in his car. On the way we reviewed my new status.

"You are lucky to have a girl like Ify," Ogiolo said. "She is the Governor's cousin. She is a celebrity announcer on Radio Rivers." He knew her. Everyone knew her, except me. How did I ever cross the path of this girl?

"Are you looking for someone?" Mr Aro asked me as I walked into the office on Monday morning. He was not looking in my direction particularly.

"Good morning, Sir," I said, surprised at his questions.

"Erico. What happened to you?" Aro was looking at me and laughing. He went through every item of clothing I had on. "Happy weekend, Eric. Very nice."

I suddenly realised I was appearing differently before Aro for the first time. He had interviewed me with my uniform and only identified me with my uniform. Aro could hardly wait for Etteh to arrive the office.

“Erico, Erico, they say a miracle has happened. PH has treated you well,” Etteh said as soon as he saw me. Aro had phoned him.

The next three months were busy. I travelled to Benin every Friday to meet Ify who came from Port-Harcourt to be with me for the weekend. I usually accompanied her to Onitsha, cross the ferry and wait for her taxi to depart for Port-Harcourt before boarding a taxi from Onitsha to Ibadan. It was a weekly routine. My bosses understood the schedule, and expected me late for work on Monday afternoons. She phoned every day, and played me a request on radio every day. My office sang the song. I was almost choked. Ify always talked of family life. She had visions of handsome kids. She would have boys that looked like me. She wanted to live in the United States. I no longer wanted to live in the United States. I was an engineer now. Oga Eric was now in Ibadan. She began to fantasize on the appropriate type of wedding. She already knew what type of wedding outfit. I knew too. She had shown me in a fashion magazine. Ify was definitely beautiful. She had an organised lifestyle. I had none. The present one was choking me. I was told what to do, and how to do it properly. It was not Eric.

January 1973 was a turning point. We were adjusting to a currency change from the British pounds to the naira. We were also changing our traffic rules. We now drove on the left, and not the right. I accompanied Ify to Onitsha for the usual departure rituals. River Niger was particularly rough for a small river. As the ferry sailed across the river from Asaba to Onitsha, the waves seemed excited, bringing large bubbles and upturning brackish water. Everyone noticed this. Smaller fishing boats scampered out of the waves as we approached. The vessel was filled mostly with goods-laden lorries. Ify gazed steadily at my countenance. She sensed there was a lot on my mind.

She sat in front of the taxi. It was a red Peugeot 404 station wagon. The red car seemed to compliment her pink dress. She had a gold scarf around her long hair, and her bangles shone. I stood by the door waiting for the other passengers to arrive. I had secured a seat in a car to Ibadan. I was the first passenger, but preferred to sit at the back. That was a smoking area. The park was in the busy Onitsha market. Traders chattered so loud you had to shout to be audible. It was better not talking, and we

were silent. At a distance I observed a small boy gazing at me. He had his wares balanced on his head.

“Sweet orange.”

I did not observe his approach. I was jolted out of my thoughts, and turned to see a half-naked boy standing with oranges on his tray. He was the boy from the distance.

“Oga, buy my orange.” He was talking directly to me. This time, he stood in front of me with small blue eyes piercing through mine. I was not thirsty, but the boy would not leave my side. He seemed to be supervising my departure rituals.

“Oga, nor come Onitsha again. This thing nor good for you.” The boy seemed to disappear after this. Soon the taxi left the park. As I watched the car move out of the parking lot, I waved Ify goodbye. It was going to be our last meeting. I was free. The thought of marriage frightened me. She was too big for me. My life was consumed in hers.

“Goodbye, Ify,” I said to myself.

“Goodbye.”

I did not see Ify again. She never stopped calling the office, and calling my name on radio, but it was over. The break was cemented by Aro. He sent me on an assignment to Onitsha as a design engineer. I shuttled between Onitsha and Enugu. I maintained two hotel apartments at the Catering Rest Houses in Onitsha and Enugu. I usually worked late, and changed the location of my studies. I was carrying out studies for the proposed Trans-Saharan Highway from Lagos to Mombassa.

I wanted to celebrate my birthday, and I needed company. I set out to the campus in search of friends. I knew I could count on members of the Pirates Confraternity. I stopped my car to give a ride to a couple. They looked like students.

“Do you want a ride to the campus?” I asked, knowing they were students. The boy looked older than I, and the girl, tall and elegant, passed for a student activist.

“Sure,” the boy said, entering the front seat as he spoke. “My name is Wally. I am studying Architecture on the Enugu Campus.”

“I am Eric. I am new in town.” We bonded almost immediately, and drove straight to his room on the campus. He lived large. He had all the trappings of a flat in his one-room apartment in school. He had no roommate.

“Do you know any sea dogs around?” I asked, as soon as he settled down. We were drinking beer together.

“Ahoy. One of them lives just next door here. He is my very good friend.” I was linked to my family again. My short stay in Enugu and Onitsha was eventful. Wally practically lived with me in the Catering Rest House. He attended lectures from there and many of the students came around. The food was paid for by my firm without questions. I had a girlfriend in the university. By now I had been healed of my dislike for girls. Ify had broken that, and also broken me down. I was now a gentleman, courteous and civil.

I was soon called to Ibadan, where I worked again with Onyebuchi on a big project in Warri. I always enjoyed what I was doing. By now I was beginning to get tired of the high hotel life and longed for the opportunity to start a home. I was given a Citroen saloon car for use. I had now perfected my driving. I was now a car owner. I was busy visiting friends in Ibadan. The car was on the road most times as late as 2 am. We would return drunk as usual from the night club. I drank but always kept my senses, even when others lost theirs. That year, the holidays were to be special. I planned to take my car to Benin to celebrate. It was going to be a surprise to my elder brother and Staffy. I passed Ore, a town about 2 hours from Benin when disaster struck. I approached the bend with some speed. I was driving fast, and could not slow down to climb the Bailey bridge built by the soldiers to replace the ones blown by the retreating Biafran soldiers during the war. A heavy timber beam stuck under the car, ripping out the entire engine block. I hit my chest on the steering wheel. The chassis of the car was compressed, and I could not get out of the car. The driver of the timber lorry behind observed the accident. He came to my rescue, and towed the car to the side of the road.

“Thank God. Oga, you get luck. This bridge don throwaway many motor inside the river before.” They offered me a ride to Benin in their timber lorry. We left the car by the side of the road, and made a four-hour journey to Benin. It was a long journey, and with the pains I felt in my chest cavity, I was in an extremely sober mood.

“What happened?” Staffy asked, as I walked into the house.

“I had an accident with my car.”

“You don’t get car?” Staffy asked, a little unhappy. He was excited at the prospects of long cruises to Warri to show off the car, and the accident. “God, why now?”

We went immediately to Ore the next morning and towed the car to Ibadan. It was the end of my experience as a car owner. Aro was very sympathetic and grateful for my safety. He soon allocated another car for my use. A driver was attached to me. I was to use him for my travels outside Ibadan.

I stayed quite a distance from the office. It was a 3-star hotel. In the evenings, I would go to the University of Ibadan and fellowship with friends. I participated in campus activities organised by the Pirates Confraternity. Ifiastic was a year older than me in Government College, Ughelli. He was a student in the university. He was a sea dog. There were no other clubs with similar ideologies as the Pirates. As a sea dog, I could sail in any ship in any of the campuses. That year a group of marooned sea dogs formed a rival group. A marooned sea dog was a pirate expelled for untoward behaviour. A pirate was sworn to high ethical behaviour in public. He never exhibited gangster attitudes, and was not to be seen drunk. He had to be in his correct senses at all times and must be held accountable for all his actions. I think it looked spiritual to me at that time. The marooned sea dogs were determined to overcome the Pirates as a rival club, and set out to unleash terrorism on students. Other groups emerged and metamorphosed into cult groups. They fought each other for boundaries.

I went out with Ifiastic and Brown B every night. We drank in Mokola and patronised the local brothels. My car was very useful. We could stay out late, and I would sleep in the hostel with Ifiastic when I was too drunk to drive home.



A Calabar Story

I hadn't seen Tebete for a year now. He never came to Ibadan. He resumed work in Etteh Aro in the Calabar office. Brandy was in charge of the company's operations in Port-Harcourt. He ensured I had a good time in Port-Harcourt. We went out often and he made sure we never lacked money to spend: he was in charge. Onyebuchi was a visiting boss, and never interfered with administrative matters. He was a specialist in structures, and was responsible for my training at that time. I was a roving engineer. The firm had not established an office in Benin, and I went wherever there was work to be done. It was exciting. I was responsible for taking decisions on the behaviour of structural elements. I set the problems, and solved them. This was practical engineering, what I was cut out for. By now, all thoughts of being an American had gone. I was comfortable at home, an engineer.

Anthony was my classmate in GCU. We shared the same seat. We were the smallest pair in class, and we sat in front of the class. He had been in the United States after we left college, and came on holidays. He spoke like an American now and always said 'gonna', 'hey' in his sentences. He was the disc jockey in Plaza, and thrilled us during the Christmas holidays. My company always had a Christmas holiday. It coincided with contractors' holidays. I had been posted to Calabar, and this was a holiday break for me. Anny Wego as we called Anthony was always happy to be home in Benin.

"That fucking shit of a country, man," he said to me one day. We were drinking beer, and he was reliving his experiences in the United States of America.

"No goddam place like home, man. Shit!"

Was this the America of my dreams? Anny Wego was a college friend. You made your best friends from college. We all grew up

together and had formed the perfect dreams of our lives together. I was glad I missed my dreams. Thanks to my elder brother, I thought. He had made sure I did not escape from the country. Anny was popular. He wore stylish jean trousers and sported the best T-shirts. He swaggered in his walk, and was the toast of every girl in town. We had built up a small army of popular boys in town. Staffy and I were members, and had our fair share of the bounty. Staffy was a student of the University of Benin. He had a football scholarship, and lived with my elder brother. He was a very close friend of the whole family.

I resumed in Ibadan to join Onyebuchi on the journey to Calabar. He was going to execute a number of projects there, and I was his assistant. Tebete was in Calabar, and had no design experience. Onyebuchi was going to teach us. My old friend Dauda was our chauffeur on the trip.

“Oga Eric, you go enjoy Calabar. The people sabi take care of somebody.” The dirty old man was looking for the sparkle in my eyes. He was sure I would be excited at the thought of having a good time with the Calabar girls. Dauda was a dear friend. He was an experienced driver, but his manners always embarrassed me. He treated me like his big boss, and not his son. He would greet me with both hands and a humble bow, removing his cap to reveal a bald head with scanty grey tufts of hair. He always looked after me, and I was grateful for his company. He was my second contact in the firm. We passed through the eastern part of Nigeria to the south-eastern states, and I had a guided tour. The ferry crossing at Oron was rather long. We did not go across the river, but along the river, and spent over an hour crossing. This is a trap, I thought. Supposing I had to swim back to land?

Calabar was a welcome village, I thought. There were modest houses and simple people. They always smiled at us. They knew we were strangers. Tebete was waiting for us at the ferry. He was standing with a man. Tebete drove one of the company cars. He was an experienced driver.

Dauda took Onyebuchi to the hotel, while I accompanied Tebete and his friend to his house. It was a company house, and I was to stay at the house with him.

“Meet Mr Okon,” he said as we took off. “Okon is a salesman. He wants to show us some cars.” Okon was a car dealer and sold

cars to most of the young graduates in town. He knew of my coming. Tebete was already negotiating with him for a car. We made our choices. I settled for a Datsun Sports car, while Tebete wanted a Ford Capri. They were sports cars. Sports cars were the cars for the boys. Okon said they were air-conditioned cars. He actually meant they were equipped with fans. I did not know the difference at that time.

We loved our cars. The boys were a select crowd, and we were identified with numbers. Tebete was number 3. I was 6. We had them inscribed on our cars, and flaunted them around town. Calabar transformed me into something I never imagined. The girls came to you and asked you out. It was exciting. You could date and have up to three girlfriends in a day, and I was busy. Tebete took me around, and I had my fill. They were inexpensive. Most of them used their own resources to take care of you. It also ensured they were most valuable to you. It kept you in check in case other girls intruded.

Tebete was an Efik. He was a proud man and was extremely conscious of his social class. It was unusual to mix with his younger siblings. They served him as lord and provider. We lived in a three-bedroom flat. Tebete and I had our own bedrooms in the flat, while his younger brother, Akrina, shared the other bedroom with Akpan. Akpan was my househelp. I hired him to look after me, and he did his job well. Akpan washed my clothes and cooked for us when Akrina was not around. Akrina and Akpan usually slept in the living room anytime Mfon was around. Mfon was Akrina's younger sister. She attended secondary school in Uyo, but spent all the holidays in Calabar with her elder brother. Mfon and Akrina were essentially kitchen hands. They cooked well. Akrina washed Tebete's car every morning, and made sure it was clean. Tebete would not take a lazy man for a companion. He was boss. Akrina was afraid of Tebete, and stayed outside if we entertained guests. He could not sit with us in the living room. That was the culture, I thought.

Okpako came to spend holidays with me in Calabar. It was a long holiday. Okpako was my best friend in the family. We did everything together. Now he was in the University of Ibadan, training for a career in Medicine. I went to the ferry station to collect him and drove straight to the office. We spent the day

together, and ended in a pepper soup joint. We came home late. Akrina and Akpan were already sprawled on the floor, ready for bed.

“Akrina, meet my younger brother,” I said carrying Okpako’s bags for him into my room. We talked for a long time, and we spent most of the time laughing at each other’s jokes. They were mostly jokes about Papa and Fabulous. We seemed to enjoy each other. For the rest of the holidays, I would vacate my room for Okpako whenever he was lucky to have the company of one of the girls. And he had quite a few. The town was very hospitable. Sometimes I would squat with Tebete in his room or just crash in the living room with the rest of the gang. Okpako had a wonderful time in Calabar. We lived like twin brothers, ate together, went out together and loved each other. You saw a deep respect we demonstrated for each other. He soon left for Benin.

Akrina came home drunk that night. He accompanied me to the ferry station to drop off Okpako. He seemed to be in a mood as we left for the station.

“I am not a houseboy,” he said between hiccups, “I am a man, too. You can’t treat me as a slave,” he said, with tears in his eyes. It was clear he had been drinking. Tebete was home and furious.

“How dare you come home late drunk?” he screamed at Akrina. Mfon was scared. She looked on, expecting some sanctions to be handed over to her dear brother.

“Is Eric not an Engineer like you? Is his brother his slave?” The words clearly reflected the deep-seated disapproval he had felt all this time. My relationship with my brother sparked off resentment in him. I knew he was right.

“Akrina, calm down,” I said, “your brother means well for you. Things will be alright.”

Akrina was seeking admission into the university, and had been relying on his brother to help secure one. He was not forthcoming. Tebete believed Akrina should secure admission into the university on merit. Akrina talked all night. He was definitely upset and went down memory lane on the inhuman treatment Tebete had been giving to them as younger ones. He was no longer going to condone it. Their relationship however improved. It was clear to Tebete, brothers were to be friends.

Situations improved in the house. We all cooked and ate

together. Mfon was a pretty girl and knew how to cook. She was my errand girl also. I had many female friends. We gave them symbols for identification. Dupsy was an extremely pretty girl. She spoke Efik and Yoruba, and lived with her mother a few streets away. She was my prize girl. She never interfered with the numerous friends I had. She was in the Girls' College, and was in the 5th class, preparing for her final exams. She spent most of the day in my house, and cooked well. I loved her. We labelled her I-ONE.

We threw a party for our friends who were posted to serve in the National Youth Service Corps scheme in Cross Rivers State. We usually had large parties. The boys came, and the girls looked forward to hooking up with them at these parties. We usually started at 9 pm, but the parties got underway around 12 midnight. Our first guest arrived at 9 pm. We had just set up the place, and were busy chilling the drinks when she walked in. She looked expensive, dressed in a brilliant red skirt and blouse. She wore knee-high boots, and clutched a black handbag. Her hair was short but made a statement. She was definitely from another town, I thought.

"Is this Tebete's party?" she asked as she glided into the spacious living room. She was escorted by a well dressed gentleman who carried an extra bag for her. He looked like her chauffeur.

"Yes," I replied. "Welcome to the party." I thought she was rather early. She stood and moved over to where I was standing, stretching out her hand.

"I am Vicky," she said, squinting her eyes. She was dark-skinned, and had very long and curly eye lashes. She had purple make-up on her cheek. Her teeth reflected the fluorescent lights in the room. Vicky is definitely charming, I thought. Just then Tebete walked in.

"Vicky, I see you have met my flat-mate?"

"My name is Eric," I cut in trying to remain the focus of Vicky's attention. Vicky was charming and I wanted her.

Soon the room filled up. Dupsy came with three girls. She was a co-host and made sure everyone was comfortable. We danced most of the time, and it was clear I was in her territory. Vicky remained on her seat, her eyes glued on me as if she was studying my associations. I had a few girlfriends at the party, and no one

displayed her possession before others. The party went on far into the night. At about 2 am, Dupsy left. Tebete went to drop her and her friends. He was interested in one of them.

Vicky approached me as I danced on the floor. I was high on alcohol and laughed at almost anything said by anyone.

“Eric, come and take me home,” she said with so much authority, you would think we came together. I took her in my sports car and drove towards her house.

“Stop,” she said in the middle of the road. We were a few blocks from her house.

“Why did you not dance with me?” she queried. I was a little surprised at the question.

“I thought you never wanted to dance. I did not want to disturb you. You were always sipping your drinks,” I said apologising.

“Who was that girl?” she asked, placing her hands on my thighs. She was looking at the dark night, as if checking for intruders.

“Dupsy is just a friend,” I lied. She had moved closer, disregarding my explanation. Her hands wrapped my entire body, and alcohol seemed to clear from my head. We held each other for a while.

Vicky followed me back into the party, and slept with me. The next morning her chauffeur came for her. She was the bishop’s daughter. Bishop Lauren was well known in town. He was a disciplinarian, and everyone avoided having a relationship with Vicky. Vicky was lonely, and she spared no words explaining her basic needs as a woman. It did not matter. I had a fresh catch. Dating Vicky was very demanding. She hunted you down. Vicky would always sit at the back of the car and send the driver to inform me she was waiting downstairs. She was a rich girl, I thought. She cooked for me with her own money. She would not accept any money from me to go shopping for foodstuff.

“I want to take good care of you,” she would say. “I am not like other girls who take money from boys. I have my own money.”

Why not? The bishop’s daughter was self-sufficient, and had some to spare for her loved ones. I never visited Vicky in her home. I was not allowed to. Her father was against such visits, and Vicky handed me the rules of her game. She said she was protected.

The relationship with Vicky was choking and uncomfortable. She tried to occupy all of my time, even waiting on me in the office. Akpan was loyal to her. He took orders from her, and I thought he was a secret agent for Vicky. She always knew who was with me, not that she could prevent me from dating other girls. Akpan served her well. They were in close rapport. I paid Akpan ₦50 per month, and he was comfortable with his salary. He sometimes bought new clothes, and dressed well. Dupsy however remained the love of my life.

Etteh was visiting the office in Calabar. I was not in the office when he came, and he was on the balcony of the two-storey building when I zoomed past. I had a car load of girls and the tape deck was at full blast, you could hear the pounding a mile off.

“My friend, report in Ibadan,” he said the next morning. “I cannot let Calabar girls kill you in my town,” he said.

Etteh had seen me almost four times that day, and he was sure I was with different girls all the time. The office was near our house, and were situated on the same road. He was concerned about my safety. He was saving me from the girls, he thought. That was it. I was transferred from Calabar.

That night, I summoned Dupsy to my house.

“I want to marry you,” I announced. “As soon as you finish your exams, we will get married.”

Dupsy was excited. She would announce the engagement to her mother she told me. Her mother was not comfortable with our relationship. I was not much of a financial support to her family. I was just a poor boy, and that was never the dream of a mother for a pretty daughter. Many times Dupsy would suggest financial assistance for her mother. Her mother was a petty trader, and was to be assisted. I was not used to giving such assistance to mothers. It was not in my character. I believed it was the parents’ responsibility to prepare their daughters for marriage, and not suitors to prepare their parents-in-law for their daughters’ marriage. We made plans to visit my brothers and sisters. I would introduce her to my parents. My younger brother and friend was in Ibadan. We made elaborate plans. I would be leaving in two weeks. I needed to finish the project I had on my drawing board.

Word went round. I was leaving Calabar. The boys rallied

around me to give me support. It was two weeks of fun. Vicky came over to my house, and asked when we were going away to Benin.

"I am going with you," she announced. "You think you can leave me in Calabar?"

I thought she was threatening me. She really meant it. She was not going to let me go. Somehow she knew I was planning to travel with Dupsy. She was not done with me. In the evening, she came to meet me in the office. I was busy. Dupsy was with me, but had to leave for her house at the presence of Vicky. Vicky brought cooked food for me to eat. As far as she was concerned, I was her husband. Her chauffeur dropped her off at my office and left.

"When are you leaving?" she asked, as if wishing me a safe trip.

"Four days time," I said innocently. I was preparing to go home from the office. It was getting dark.

"Please, take me somewhere. I want to show you something." It was a strange request, but I was curious. I did not want to offend her. I had told her the previous day that I could no longer continue with the relationship. She did not put up a fight then. Bringing food to me in the office that day looked like an anti-climax.

We got into the car and drove to the reserved area in Calabar. It was a spot behind the Hope Waddle Institute. She never said a word throughout the trip. She just gave directions with her hands. Her dressing suggested trouble, but I was confident I could beat her if we went into a fight. I drove on. The drive took quite a while. She directed all the way, and when we returned to the same spot I said nothing. I obeyed the Bishop's daughter.

The moon was up, and the skies clear. The winds were gentle, and the trees welcomed us as we drove past. It was a romantic scenery, and I began to sense unease. Was Vicky going to announce pregnancy, or just plead for me to marry her.

"Stop here," she said. It seemed she had been crying although I took no notice.

"Park here." We parked under a tree in a location that looked like a lover's park. There was a bench on the bank of what looked like an endless river. It was the Atlantic Ocean. She led the way

and sat on the bench. I was now smoking, expecting trouble.

“Eric,” she said in a faint voice, “I have brought you here to say goodbye.”

“Don’t worry. I will always come to Calabar to see all of you,” I said, relaxing and eyeing the edge of the ocean. I could not swim, and my imagination went wild. Supposing we fell into the ocean? Images of water mermaids and sharks flashed across my mind, but not for long.

“Bye, Eric,” she said standing up from the bench and approaching the edge of the ocean. “I am going. I cannot live in Calabar alone. If you go I just have to die.”

I went into instant panic. I was shaking with fear. I begged for her life, and made instant promises not to go without her. That was the only condition she gave. I was to take her to Benin with me or else she was going to jump into the Atlantic Ocean. Vicky made such a scene. At a point she jumped or so, I thought. The place was rather dark. The moonlight was shielded with clouds and cast shadows over the beach. It seemed as if she was saved by a branch, so I was able to rescue her from the ocean.

We spent about two hours at the beach side. Finally, Vicky agreed to go home. We went to my house. I convinced Vicky I was not to leave Calabar in the next three weeks. I needed to buy time. The next morning, I noticed my desk keys were missing. I had to go back to the beach side to look for the keys.

I approached the bench with a rude shock. The bench was there, and I found my keys where it had dropped, but there was no ocean. The water had receded about 100 meters. It was low tide. At high tide the water just covered about 300 millimetres, and even if she had plunged into the ocean, she needed to run into the ocean at least 300 meters to get herself covered with water. Now I was angry.

Vicky was waiting in my office when I got back.

“I am just from the Ocean,” I said laughing. “In case you need to die, try an overdose of valium,” I recommended. “I am through with this relationship.”

Vicky left without a word. The car just drove off. That night at home I met Akpan crying. He wanted to accompany me to Benin.

“Start a small trade,” I told Akpan. “You can start selling something like groundnuts and popcorn.” It was a popular trade

with young boys. I had given Akpan enough money in the last months to set up a small business.

"I no get any money," Akpan said. "Madam don take the money. She dey use am for Oga."

Vicky had been collecting all of Akpan's earnings and tips. She promised him I was going to set up a trade for him. Akpan thought I asked Vicky to keep his money. All the money Vicky used to cook for me was Akpan's. She was dangerous, I thought. Akpan was convinced he was going to Benin with me and Vicky. She told him we were going to get married. Vicky certainly had a style of her own. The cab driver she always hired to carry her around town, sometimes for the whole day was actually her boyfriend, who thought he was carrying his girlfriend to her father's younger brother from Brazil who had come to spend time in Calabar. She never introduced him because she told him I spoke Brazilian French only. That was Vicky.

Dupsy was early. She was waiting at the park by the bus stop as we had arranged. Vicky was not giving up on me. She was determined to accompany me to Benin. It was the promise that got her to abort the attempted suicide. I didn't let her know I visited the crime scene and discovered there was no water. I told her I was leaving in two weeks and she did not bother to check on me that day. Dupsy packed quite a bunch you would think she was going to be betrothed. She looked ravishing with her familiar white suit and silver necklace. She held a novel she was going to read on the long journey. We had two choices, either the ferry crossing at Oron, or the crossing at Itigidi. We headed for Itigidi. The trip was like a honeymoon. We stopped at almost any public place, restaurant or beer parlour to refresh and profess our desire to stick forever.

Staffy was waiting as usual. We could almost read minds. He knew where I was at anytime and what I was up to. As we drove in, Staffy told me Papa was home. He was waiting to see the doctor the next morning. Papa had been having issues with his health. He was hypertensive and always missed his drugs. He was feeling out of sorts now.

"Papa, migwo," I said as I entered.

"Migwo, Sir," Dupsy said following after me. She guessed by now he was my father and that was the traditional way to greet.

“My son,” Papa said in his usual show off. His son was a successful engineer. “Are you on transfer again to Benin?”

“Yes, Papa. I have come to establish a branch of our office in Benin.” Papa was regarding Dupsy. His eyes were fixed on her with an approving smile.

“Papa, this is my wife to be. The girl I want to marry.”

“Come, my daughter. Sit here.” My father was all smiles as he wrapped his hands around Dupsy. “Make sure you take good care of my son,” he said, gazing into her eyes to ensure she got the message, and hit the nail on the head. “When?” he asked.

“Very soon,” I said, “as soon as she finishes her exams.”

Papa was pleased. Mama was even more excited about the prospects of my getting married. She wanted much to carry her grandchildren. In Ibadan, Dupsy met my younger brother. She knew him from his visit to Calabar, and we had a very wonderful time. Dupsy stayed with me in Ibadan for one week. During the weekend, we went to Benin before her trip back to Calabar. The die was now cast.

“Promise me you will never leave me,” Dupsy said as we sat to review our plans. She was in love.

“Why would I leave you?” I asked rather surprised at her question.

“We must take an oath,” she said.

“Okay. No problem.”

Dupsy reached for her handbag and brought out a new razor blade.

“Let us take blood oaths.”

We made slight cuts on our right thumbs and extracted small drops of blood, mixed them and kissed each other’s thumbs. We were bound to each other. We would never leave each other. Soon, Dupsy left for Calabar. I gave her a warm send-off. We went clubbing the night before and had a wonderful time together. It was like a pre-honeymoon.

I went to Warri to visit my friend, Goddy. He was my best friend. We had been together since we were kids in the primary school. Goddy left the University of Ibadan where he studied for a degree in medicine after his stint at the University of Ibadan Teaching Hospital and went on summer vacation to Germany. He had fulfilled his ambition of relocating to Europe. We all

wanted to go abroad. I heard he was back. He had spent eight years in Germany. I was happy to learn he was back in the country.

I approached his mother's house with great expectations. As I knocked on the door, I heard voices from his room. I was sure there was someone with him.

"Welcome, Erico," Goddy said with his arms outstretched as the door opened to let me in. He was alone. He looked so agile and excited to see me. He was wearing a brown robe and had a short staff with him. He was probably praying when I approached, trying to explain the source of the voices. Maybe he now spoke in tongues, I imagined. I was just glad I was in the presence of my childhood friend. We had gone a long way together.

"I heard you came back from Germany," I said, wanting to hear the details of his exploits. Goddy was looking at me strangely and seemed to select brief sentences in the remaining parts of our conversation.

"I was with the monks in a German monastery," he said. "They send their greetings."

Goddy had been interested in spirituality since our final year in Government College. He had introduced me to Marie Corelli, and Tuesday Lobsang Rampa's writings on the subject. I was not desperate for God at that time. I read the books but preferred to maintain my status quo as the boy Stanley Parker. I did not want to wear strange apparels and acquire some spiritual titles as a guru of any sorts. Goddy always thought I was cut out for spirituality and spared no time bringing up the subject anytime we met.

"Did you continue with mysticism in Germany?" I asked, quite disappointed. My friend only achieved a religion after his long eight years sojourn abroad. The room was dark. The windows were closed. There were coloured candles in a small circle on the middle of his reading table, a chaplet and some books bound in dark red. I must have interrupted his divination, I thought.

"I am on a mission to release Africa from the dark forces," he declared proudly. "Wait!" Goddy exploded starry eyed. It was an unusual hush. "They are passing by."

Goddy was referring to witches. They were passing by in his vision, or whatever perceptions he was employing at that time. I got rather scared. My friend was behaving strangely, and he

seemed to notice my apprehension at his attitude.

"You are the only one I trust," he said holding both of my hands as a sign of comradeship. "You are the only one who knows I am not mad." He was right, I thought. Goddy was my pal. We had watched each other's back. Although he had started a drug habit in the primary school, it did not seem severe enough to cause any form of mental instability. Goddy was not mad, I reasoned.

"Maybe people don't understand what you know," I said.

It was the least I could say at that time to maintain my place in his good books. I was getting worried. Staying in a room with a lunatic might be challenging and I was not going to take chances.

"Okay, when you get to Benin you will find food on the dining table. Just eat the food. Don't ask how it got there," he said as I made an excuse to get back to Benin.

"That will show you more of what I can see. Don't stop on the way at any time," he continued gazing through me. His attention was definitely beyond my face.

"Do you like dodo and beans?" he asked as if to increase his gifts to me on this historic visit.

"Yes," I answered forcing an excitement as I faked a smile.

"Good. You will see a plate with a cup of bournvita also on the table."

"Thanks, Goddy. I'll see you again soon," I said reaching for the door. I had stayed too long and was really getting uncomfortable.

Goddy insisted on seeing me off to the car. Practically everyone we passed was seen by him to walk on her head. They were mostly women. I entered my car and sped away.

I thought of Goddy throughout the trip. For some strange reason I believed him. My friend now saw things other people could not. He was gifted. I didn't dare stop on the way in case I would be responsible for the non-manifestation of a great vision. I drove straight to the house and approached the dining table for my gift. It was empty. I checked the kitchen in case it was yet to be served. Empty. There was no food in the house. Fabulous had not returned from work to start the evening meal.

Goddy was mad!

I set out for Ibadan. I was required wherever there was a project to be designed. I stayed in a small hotel in Mokola. By now I was used to permanent residency in hotels, and the routine was the same. Boring. I missed Calabar. It was like the home I wanted. Kind people, friendly neighbours and almost slaves to strangers. There was Dupsy. I spent almost all the time in the office in deep thoughts. Mr Aro must have been aware and disturbed at the turn of events. Mr Aro was a principled man. Nothing ever distracted him. He was married to engineering, and family waited for him. He was concerned that I was feeling lonely in Ibadan. Everyone knew I was a busy lad in Calabar. I was No. 6.

“Erico. Get ready to dash to Calabar next week. Mr Bolanle is coming from Lagos to see you. I told him you had finished the designs of the University Building in Calabar. Try and be there when he comes. He has been directed from the Ministry of Works, Lagos. Good luck, Eric,” Aro had pushed the buck on me. I had no idea what he was talking about. I never saw or heard of any project in Calabar.

Mr Bolanle came the next day to the office. He had a set of design drawings from the architect in his hands. He was talking to Aro and laughing. They seemed amused at something. As soon as they called me, it became clear Mr Bolanle desperately needed my help. My help, he said. He was a well-built man with good charisma. You could tell he schooled abroad. He went to Oxford University and was a relation of the Works Minister. He was a gentleman and had a way with words. He could convince you that you were female instead of male, and I had an instant liking for him.

“I will get the drawings ready before your equipment arrive in Calabar,” I assured him.

He had been paid for the project and there were no drawings for construction. I was to get them. I completed my assignments in Ibadan and set out for Benin. I had left all my belongings in Benin. I needed to stop the migrant life and settle down, and had begun to buy a few household items. I moved some back to Calabar. It was an excuse to stay as long as I needed.

I was going to give Dupsy a pleasant surprise, I thought. She would never have dreamed I would be back after two weeks. It had been two long weeks. I drove straight to the office.

Accommodation had been reserved for me in a one-room tastefully furnished apartment in the office complex for my stay. It was meant to be temporary. I dropped my things, had a shower and drove straight to Dupsy's house. It was dark, and the trees whistled to warn of a likely shower. The night was cold and quiet. Parked in front of Dupsy's house was a Mercedes Benz car. It was a familiar car, belonging to a prominent man in town. I parked right behind the car and went into the compound.

Dupsy's mother was sitting in front of her own apartment. She had her own room in a four single room apartment building. She owned the house and had given her daughter her own room. I sometimes spent long hours in the room with Dupsy. I was known to her, although she never thought too much of me. I was a young boy, incapable of providing high comfort levels to befit her status in life.

"Good evening, Ma" I said.

"Dupsy is not in. She travelled. She will come back tomorrow. Come tomorrow." The answer was rushed. There seemed an attempt to get rid of me as quickly as possible.

"But light dey her room," I said pointing to her room. The curtains were tucked in, suggesting she was probably in the room.

"Nar me put am so." This time she was stammering.

"Tell am say I go come tomorrow," I said pretending to leave. I was sure she was hiding something from me. I drove off and called almost every 30 minutes to find the car still parked outside. The lights were off in Dupsy's room, and the mother had gone inside, so I parked my car a few yards away and hid in the bushes near the Mercedes Benz car. It was comfortable.

I was awakened by noises of happy laughter.

"Bring wetin you promise me tomorrow. I will expect you in the night as usual."

"My sweet, you know I will take care of you. You are my sweet baby." Dupsy entered the car with him and they talked for some time. Dupsy was leaning on him and he was caressing her breasts. My heart pounded furiously as I watched in amazement.

"Goodnight, Darling," Dupsy said as the car engine started. I could see them from my little hiding place. It was a place of pure torture, but I was enjoying the unbelievable spectacle.

As soon as Dupsy closed her door I drove home. It was 2 am

and I was exhausted from the long journey and the sight of my wife in another man's arms, just two weeks after our oath.

Nothing Dupsy said would make me see her again. It was my first heartbreak and it was devastating. She cheated on me with a 65-year-old man. He gave her money and bought her mother expensive gifts. Her mother preferred that relationship to mine. Dupsy pleaded several times but never stopped seeing her man. It was all over between us. No marriage.

Tonia helped me along. The remaining weeks were messy. We drank every night and consoled each other. Tonia was Tebete's girl. He did not care about her, and she loved him with a passion. We were both heartbroken, and consoled each other. I soon finished my assignment with Mr Bankole. He was thrilled at the results I gave him. He met his drawings in the office when he arrived Calabar. I was gone and vowed never to return.

On my way to Benin, I had a minor car accident. My car somersaulted several times at a bend. I was deep in thought and had not seen the motorcycle rider pull into the road in front of me. I slammed on the brakes and found myself in the bush. I was not hurt, and my car was only slightly dented. Close call I thought, and all because of Dupsy. Rather than review the blessings of life, I was analysing the yardsticks for hate. I never wanted to see Dupsy again, I thought. I never mentioned a word to Staffy or my parents. Life had to continue. I had a new assignment. I was transferred to Benin to open a new branch there.

I woke up to find Papa washing my car the next morning. He was whistling as he scrubbed at the tyres.

"Wetin, Papa?" I asked, very shocked at what he was doing.

"Make the car fine. Nar better person go enter the front of this car. Not wayo girl."

I froze. Did Papa know of the heartbreak, or was he just desperate for a wife for me?

"Papa, leave am."

Papa stood and looked straight into my eyes. It was more like my heart. "Nor worry, my pikin, car nar my own. I go make am clean for am to enjoy."

"Thank you, Papa," I said embracing him. Tears swelled in my eyes. "I will make you proud," I said, going in with him. He never asked what I was doing in Benin. He just knew I was now in Benin.

|| Eleven || Chief Engineer

The search for an office space was an easy task. Engr. Hima was a personal friend of Etteh, and had been asked to assist in establishing a branch office of the firm in Benin. He was from Benin and was in charge of projects in the University Teaching Hospital. I was appointed to head the office operations in Benin. I was the Resident Engineer/Manager of the company's operations in Benin. It was not challenging. Engr. Onyebuchi was my boss, and was responsible for supervising my operations. The designs of the buildings for the University Teaching Hospital were done in Ibadan. I was responsible for the designs and drawings, under the strict supervision of Onyebuchi. The buildings were now to be constructed, and I was required to provide supervision to the contractor. Onyebuchi was in Benin for a few days and we set out to commence the project. The contractor was an experienced one, and I had the opportunity to learn from his expertise.

I stayed with my brother, Fabulous, in Benin. I had not lived on my own in a house, and I thought it was about time I experienced some home cooking. My hotel experiences bored deep holes in my pockets, and were gradually transforming me into a drunk. Fabulous worked in a Federal Ministry at this time. He was the boss in the office in Benin, and drove a personal car and the office *Land Rover*. He always undertook field trips and left the house for the greater part of the week. Staffy was a student of the University of Benin, and lived with Fabulous. I was glad to be back home. I had wandered around for too long.

Fabulous had many female friends, and it didn't take long before I acquired my own collection. I was contemplating settling down with a wife. I needed to have a home of my own also. I longed for my own flat, instead of living with my elder brother. There would be freedom in that I imagined.

Osarobo was my flame. She was intelligent and worked in the State Ministry of Finance. She worked as an Accounts Assistant. She was slim and elegant. She loved dancing and swimming, and we always went to the Plaza every weekend. She could not go to the night club with me because of her very strict upbringing. She never allowed me to cross boundaries anytime we were together. She believed in the sanctity of sex only after marriage. I was comfortable with that. I was not going to have another Dupsy. The disappointment of losing Dupsy was still heavy on my mind, and I was being careful. I took Osarobo to work every day and took her back from work. She needed to be convinced I really loved her. It was easy to brand me as a play boy. I was actually one, but had decided to give the relationship a try. She presented an innocent young maiden before me, and I thought I was lucky to have this Christian girl for a fiancé. I spent many long hours with her in her home. Her parents knew me well and always welcomed me in their house.

Aro sent documents to the Benin office through Onyebuchi. He was on his way to Enugu, and I was required to deliver the documents to the Registrar of the Petroleum Training Institute, Effurun which had just been established in Warri. The institute was to train middle manpower for the petroleum industry in Nigeria which was now at the centre of the economy.

I waited in the secretary's office for a while. The Registrar was out in town, and the Secretary would not receive the documents on his behalf. It was not a very busy office at this time. The office was a temporary one. It was constructed by the major contractor for the institute and had only four rooms. The general office was large and seated 6 officers. They were busy. I saw many documents on their tables and everyone seemed occupied. The Secretary was also busy. She was preparing documents and attended to the phone. It never stopped ringing. Soon the Registrar walked in. I had not seen him before and was unaware he was the Registrar. His face looked vaguely familiar. He was a slim man with kind looks. He was well dressed and you could tell he was of a good stock. Suddenly he stopped in front of me.

"Eric, what are you doing here?" I looked around me to confirm he actually meant me. It was a surprise.

“Good morning, Sir,” I said standing up.

“Digwe,” he ordered. He commanded me to greet him as an elder person in the traditional Urhobo way. It showed he knew me, and he was an Urhobo man.

“Migwo, Sir,” I said with knees slightly bent. It meant literally that I was on my knees. It was the traditional way to greet anyone who was older than you.

“Come on in,” he said. He was accompanied by his driver and orderly, who carried files and bags after him. His office was spacious and well furnished. I sat in a corner while he attended to a few calls and messages his secretary had handed over to him. I felt important.

“How is Papa?” he said when we were now alone. He obviously knew my father. He was a personal friend of Papa, and was his first cousin. This was family. He was also an old boy of Government College, Ughelli. I did not meet him at school, but was aware of his many achievements in school. He had been an excellent footballer, and had represented the school in athletics also.

“Papa is fine,” I said.

“What are you doing in my office?” he said, motioning me to sit by his table. There were two chairs reserved for visitors who had matters to discuss with him. I carried the documents and edged to the table, placing them there.

“My boss asked me to deliver these documents to you. I work for the consulting firm. We designed the buildings for this institute.”

His eyes lit up. You could see joy and pride all over his face.

“You designed the buildings?” he said, taking the documents from me. “You have done well. Papa must be proud of you. You will be working here now to supervise the construction. You can see the contractors have already been mobilised to site. When are you coming to assume duty?”

It was a long and shocking sentence. Was this what my transfer to Benin was all about? Warri was the last place I wanted to work in. Not with my mother shouting at me again. I could sense my freedom fly away. I was not ready to be Mama’s boy. I was not going to do this except for the prospects of engineering experience. I was already busy with the University Teaching

Hospital. Moreover, this was a narrow field. How was I to spend all my time just looking at what contractors did on a few buildings? Learning engineering was more than making money from engineering, I thought.

I ran both projects from Benin. I was entitled to reimbursable expenses incurred while doing office work, including mileage claims and lunch. I seldom requested reimbursements except when broke. I was hardly broke. I had no responsibilities except cigarettes and beer. I was a single freelance engineer with a sports car for effect.

I went to the construction site in Warri on a routine check. I had been summoned by the Registrar to check the work done by the contractors. The site was marshy, and the foundations to the four-storey buildings were quite deep. The contractor had done about 8 of the buildings and waited for the engineer's approval to move to the next stage in the construction. I was to give this approval. Things were difficult for me at that time. I was broke. The month had gone far, and I was low on cash. I knew I could count on Mama for fuel money, so I set out confidently for Warri.

As I drove into the premises of the Petroleum Institute, a young man was standing in front of the Registrar's office. He was an Italian, representing the construction firm. He was the project engineer and manager of the site. He was smiling as he came to open my car door with courtesy.

"Welcome, Engineer," he said as I came down from the car, a little apprehensive. He had never been this nice to me before. There was no need for the sudden friendship. I became a little uncomfortable.

"Please, let's go into my office," he said politely as I headed in the direction of the project sites. "I want to show you something."

We went into his office, and he ordered beer. I took one of his Italian cigars. It was my fringe benefit. He always had expensive Italian cigars, and was my regular supplier anytime I was on the site. We worked well, strictly on business terms. He ordered everyone out of his office and searched his drawer for something. Suddenly, he brought out a brown envelope. It was carefully sealed and was so fat the envelope could not seal properly. It contained money and I could see five naira notes bulging out. It dawned on me. This man was offering me a bribe. How wrong.

I was a pirate, and was forbidden to take bribes. I was well trained. I cut in, politely.

“What exactly do you want me to do for you?” I asked.

He retreated, keeping the envelope on the table, in case the price he was offering was not enough.

“You see, Engineer, I did not see the notes on the drawings. We used mild steel bars instead of the high tensile bars you specified on the drawings. All the eight foundations were affected. I was not here when the foreman did the job. I have fired him,” He rattled on, a little frightened. He was expecting an order to demolish the columns and reconstruct them using the specified steel. I knew better. We were at the foundations, still underground.

“Let’s go and see,” I ordered standing up. He quickly tucked the envelope in the drawer and led the way.

“Easy,” I said, “add four extra bars to the existing column bars and add an additional two inches of concrete around the columns. Remember to use the specified bars once we get out of the ground. It will even strengthen the columns at the ground floor levels.”

We went back to his office and I gave him an instruction in writing. It sounded like a variation of order. It meant he was going to be paid extra for making a mistake. I left an amazed Italian boy at the site. He could not believe his luck. Was I foolish? I thought as I drove to the Warri main market. My fuel lights were on. Mama was happy to welcome her engineer son. She made a show of announcing me in the tobacco line. Some of the oldest women and popular indigenes of Warri had shops in that line. They were all known, and they knew me when I was born. They were proud of my little achievement. Mama gave me money, and I zoomed off to Benin.

I informed Mr Aro of the Registrar’s request. “He wants another engineer,” I lied. “I am his nephew, and he thinks he will be partial in his judgments,” I said, explaining reasons why I was inappropriate for the position of Resident Site Engineer for the project. Moreover I would assist the nominee and ensure swift action on our files and claims. It went well for Mr Aro. And for me!

Mr Akampa assumed duty as Chief Resident Engineer in Warri. He was not a graduate from the university, but had worked

in the firm for four years. He was a founding staff of the firm. He had worked in a construction firm as a foreman before joining the firm. He was a brother to Etteh, and elderly. I introduced Akampa to the Registrar. He trusted me and assumed he was as competent as I was in designs. Mr Akampa was welcome. Mr Ponti showed Akampa his office. It was next to his and well furnished. Ponti had a lot of regards for me. I had saved him losses and made money for him. I was a good engineer, he thought, and so will Mr Akampa be. I continued to deliver messages and documents to the Registrar from Mr Aro. It was convenient, and anytime I arrived in Warri, I visited Mr Akampa in his house. He was usually at home. There were usually no challenges on the site, except routine inspections and certifications. Akampa was working with a very competent contractor, and was not required to provide engineering solutions. I usually did on behalf of the firm. I designed the structures with Onyebuchi. By now I was a civil engineer. My training was over.

I heard sweet organ music as I approached Akampa's house. It was a piece from Handel's collections. I entered quietly trying not to disturb or distract him. The doors to the duplex were open. The table in the living room had a bottle of brandy and three glasses on it. He must have been entertaining guests before my arrival. I heard voices upstairs. It was madam and one of the guests, I thought. Suddenly Akampa stopped the music and turned to me.

"Good evening, Chief," I said standing up to pay my usual respects. He was starry eyed as he screamed at me.

"You stupid boy. Who do you think you are? You small boy," he said hissing. He was definitely upset. "Do you think you are my boss in this town? I was an engineer before you were born. How dare you come to my place of work and tell me what to do?" The words ran out of him with so much energy I started shaking with fright. Just then the wife came downstairs. She must have heard the husband's voice. I didn't have time to say good evening.

"You think you can interfere in my husband's job in this town?" she said, pointing her fingers at me. "Don't ever come here again, you small boy. My husband can do the job."

"Get out," their two voices echoed. It was definitely rehearsed,

I thought, as I made my way to my car. What had I done? I was so confused and angry. I restrained myself from talking back. I had to know what I did to have offended them. I was at a loss. Mr Aro advised me not to visit them at home anymore. I was to deal directly with the Registrar. With time I cut short my visits to Warri. Mr Akampa was now left alone to manage the affairs of the site. I told the Registrar I was on a more challenging assignment in Benin and Agbor. Mr Akampa was very experienced and capable of managing the site, I explained.

Mr Onyebuchi was a very meticulous man. He was required to audit my accounts every month. Many times the attempts to balance my accounts consumed my salary for the month. I relied on Mama for subvention. Onyebuchi would compute the distance between Benin and Warri and approve half of my mileage claims. I depended on the claims to balance my books. I never bothered to keep receipts for the day-to-day expenses I ran in the course of duty. I was getting frustrated. It seemed Mr Onyebuchi did not trust me. It was an insult on my personality. I started looking for a way out.

The construction industry was booming and companies were recruiting engineers to fill vacant positions. They were mostly consulting firms. Most construction firms had expatriate engineers as their chief executives. I attended many recruitment interviews and never got any favourable replies. Finally, a firm in Ibadan promised me a job. I was to return for the answer in two weeks.

“Sorry, we cannot take you away from Etteh Aro & Partners,” the principal partner told me. He was a friend of Etteh and they were aware I was the employee in charge of their Benin operations. I was furious and now desperate. They would have offered me a bigger salary, and exciting job prospects. I was to work in their oil field locations in Forcados.

Akona & Sons was the next company I applied to for a job. I changed my work strategy and sought for construction companies. I would be unknown to them. Akona & Sons had advertised in the newspapers for the position of Assistant Chief Engineer. I was qualified for this position and reported. Chief Akona personally interviewed me. He wasted no time recruiting me. The pay was high; almost three times what I earned in my

firm. I was delighted.

“You will be working under Mr Brighten,” he said. “He will be coming from Britain shortly. You will be his assistant. He is a highway specialist.”

I had no experience in Highway designs before now. Onyebuchi and Etteh preferred me as a structural engineer. I managed to salvage some knowledge from my association with Tebete in Calabar. He was a highway engineer, and had taught me how to design highways. It was enough experience for Chief Akona. He had won many highway contracts from the Bendel State Government and needed engineers. Since I was from Etteh Aro & Partners, I had to be good. I was hired. I called Etteh to tell him of my new job.

“Erico, you won’t survive there,” he said laughing.

“My friend, you cannot learn anything with a bloody contractor,” he told me, laughing over the phone.

“When you are tired, just resume in your office in Benin.”

He took it as a big joke, but I was dead serious. I was leaving his employment. It did not seem to bother him. I was never replaced in Benin. My secretary and chief draftsman kept in touch with me. I gave them instructions from anywhere I was. I was very much a part of the family. There was no quarrel, only job dissatisfaction. Onyebuchi had triggered the reaction in me. Why did Mr Aro advise me to restrict my movements to Warri, and why did Mr Akampa unleash insults on me?

Chief Akona took me to the Ministry of Works in Benin. He introduced me to the Honourable Commissioner of Works and Transport.

“Meet my Chief Engineer,” he said everywhere we entered.

“He is a consultant from Etteh Aro & Partners.”

The name of the firm I trained in ‘guaranteed’ my competence as a highway engineer, and was all Chief Akona needed to show me off as very competent. Etteh Aro was regarded as the leading experts in the engineering industry, and I was their manager in Benin. The Governor was very impressed. I was an indigene of the state, and Chief Akona was his personal friend. I was to be in charge of three big road projects he had awarded to the Chief.

I assumed work in Agbor. The company was rehabilitating the main road in Agbor town. I was introduced to the project

engineer on site.

“Meet Mr Ikogho. He is the Chief Engineer,” he said introducing me to Mr Okafor.

Okafor was a polytechnic graduate. He had worked for two years and had been responsible to the Chief on all his operations. I was now the Chief Engineer. Where was the white man promised me as boss? I was going to be on my own. I became nervous. I had very little experience in construction, and I had not designed many roads before. As soon as I arrived in Ughelli, it dawned on me I was the overall boss, directly responsible to the Chief. I represented the company at every meeting called in Benin. I was not required to say much. Chief had the answers they needed. It was mostly financial.

In Ughelli, I was given a block of two flats, tastefully furnished. I used one as my office and guest house and lived in the other one. I was assigned an official car. It was a new pick-up van, and I was assigned a driver. He was a native of Ughelli, and lived a few blocks away. I spent a lot of time in Warri. I usually went to Lido Night Club there. It was my favourite club from old days. Rabon Zolo accompanied me on the trips to Warri. He was a friend from Benin. I gave him a lift one weekend on my way to Ughelli. I went to spend the weekend. Rabon worked in a local building materials store in Ughelli. It was owned by his mother, and he was the manager. There was business in Ughelli and Rabon had been in Ughelli for four years. He knew the town well, he was an area boy and I soon settled down in town.

I returned one day from Warri to find my mother waiting for me. Rabon Zolo and Caro were with me. Caro was a local club girl from Lido Night Club. She was my lover girl. Mama was sitting outside. She seemed disturbed.

“Nar Lati your brother,” she said.

“Wetin dey do am?” I asked

“Lati run commot for school. E come Warri for market. Them say e don come Ughelli, dey scatter school.” Mama was now crying.

Rabon and I went in search of Lati. He was not in school at the time we got there. Cardino told us Lati was behaving funny. He started talking loudly and misbehaving soon after the end of year results were announced. Lati was first in the class and as

soon as the results were announced he immediately tore his clothes and ran around like a lunatic. Cardino was Lati's younger brother. They were the last boys of our family of 5 boys. I was the second boy and was in a dilemma. Was my own brother a lunatic? We found Lati at the market square.

"Eric, I was looking for you," he said chewing gum ferociously. "Where are you in this town? They said you were working in Ughelli?" Lati had not talked familiarly with me like this before, and I was careful.

"Let's go home," I said, opening the front door for Lati. Rabon sat in front with him. I was driving the pick-up van. We drove home. Mama and Caro were waiting. They were worried. Mama cried uncontrollably and blamed enemies for the calamity that had befallen her. Her son Lati was behaving like a lunatic.

The journey to Benin was eventful. Lati was screaming as we drove to Benin. But for his mud-stained uniform and his facial resemblance to mine, he could have convinced the soldiers at check points we were kidnapping him. Mama dropped at the roundabout in Warri. We did not need her to accompany us to Benin. There was a psychiatric hospital in Benin, and we were taking him there for treatment.

We arrived Benin in the night. Lati had given us so many problems on the way. He was not violent but extremely crafty. We stopped many times on the road for Lati to ease himself. He knew how to convince us he was pressed. Then he would go missing and just as we gave up searching for him in the nearby bushes, Lati would be found in the back seat of the pick-up van waiting for us. He talked almost about everything. Lati was a playboy, and was not close to me. We had been pursuing our different careers and never got together as brothers. In his third year at school, Lati came 30th in class. He was almost at the bottom of the class. He and Cardino attended Government College and were in the same class. Lati missed two classes. He had run away from home earlier to Burutu. He was a rascal. One day, I invited Lati and Cardino to my office in Benin. They were on holidays. I sat them down and told them a long story about my various attempts to emigrate to the US, and how I missed a first-class in the university because of my wayward behaviour. It was a sermon of surprise. Lati and Cardino never imagined I cared

about their welfare. I had been a lone ranger, minding my own business in the house. I did not seem to care about anyone. For two hours they listened patiently to me as I advised them to carve a future for themselves.

“Would you like to be like Papa?” I admonished. “Papa is giving us a future. Fabulous is working hard to make sure we all become better persons,” I concluded my sermon.

They had left my office with sunken hearts. That was a year ago. As I drove into the compound, tears filled my tired eyes. Had I caused Lati’s problems? Lati became a recluse after my sermon and never stopped reading after that. Was his unstable behaviour the result of this?

Staffy was waiting for us at home. Fabulous was away to a neighbour’s house and immediately rushed home to meet us. Fabulous was scheduled to travel to London in a few days time. This was going to be a distraction, and we decided we had to put Lati away in a mental home. That night, Lati talked non-stop. He insulted us in all his utterances, and recalled unprintable aspects of our lives together. He had such memory. We could not afford to sleep. Early next morning, we decided it was best we took him to Abeokuta. The mental hospital there was reputed for effective cure to mental illnesses. We headed for Abeokuta immediately. I drove all through. Fabulous sat in front with me and Staffy held Lati with Rabon at the back. He was agitated, and had to be curtailed. Rabon was well built. Six feet three inches tall, Rabon was bulky and extremely muscular. He was a sports man, and participated in Judoka in Sports Council events. He was trained and experienced in subduing people who exhibited violent behaviour. We were fortunate to have him as a friend. He was loyal and treated Lati as a brother.

We arrived Abeokuta in the afternoon and headed for the Aro Mental Home. We immediately sought audience with the doctor. “We only treat patients referred to us from other hospitals,” the doctor said. We were required to bring a letter from another doctor. We were devastated. We had to return. As we prepared to depart Abeokuta, Lati was nowhere to be found. He had escaped. Rabon and Staffy had fallen asleep. We combed the whole town. We knew little of where to look and drove aimlessly asking for any signs of recognition from anybody who may have seen a

schoolboy. Finally we traced Lati 10 miles on the way to Lagos on the Abeokuta-Lagos Highway. He was talking to himself and walking very fast.

“I am going to Lagos,” he said as we called out to him. “You people think I am mad? I will show you in Lagos.”

Staffy and Rabon grabbed him and practically threw him into the back of the van. The journey was tedious. I was visibly tired, but had to drive. We could not afford to eat. Lati had to be hungry first, and he was not going to eat.

We arrived Benin in the evening and immediately drove to the Psychiatric Hospital. Lati was immediately admitted and transferred to Mile 18. It was the place for severe cases, usually the violent cases. We were happy. Mile 18 was well fortified. The patients were chained and some put in cages to prevent them escaping.

We went home to rest after three days of non-stop driving. We could not sleep. Mama was waiting at home for news about Lati.

“He has been admitted in hospital,” we told her in Urhobo. Fabulous spoke Urhobo well and convinced Mama we were on top of the game. Mama went home. At night about 7 pm, a young man walked into our living room and asked for Fabulous. A young man had just arrived from England and had been attacked by armed robbers. He found him on the Lagos-Benin Highway. He was stranded and assured his benefactor that there were relations in Benin who would take care of the fare. He had hired him to drop him off in his house. We went after him to see this great cousin. It was Lati. He was laughing. Lati had escaped from the hospital, in spite of the tight security and convinced the driver he was from London. It was easy to explain his untidy dressing with the robbery. The driver was sympathetic and refused any payment. We were back where we started. Lati was much calmer now and talked less. Next morning, we drove Lati to Mile 18. This time he was chained. He was considered dangerous but not treated as a dangerous one. He was treated with respect. Having succeeded in securing admission in the hospital safely, we went home.

Fabulous had to prepare for his journey to London. He was going to buy musical equipment. Fabulous had an eye for business. He took a loan from the bank to establish a night club

business. He needed more money and I had to forego the land I had paid for in the GRA. My friend and classmate had sold me a piece of land in Boundary Road, a choice location in the GRA. He inherited his father's property and disposed of many pieces of land. I got one. Fabulous needed the money to establish the business. I gave him the money. It was going to be a family business. Fabulous was the 'head' of the family. Papa had been sick for sometime now, and Fabulous took care of all of us. He paid the school fees. I used all of my earnings to maintain my fast-lane lifestyle. Fabulous required nothing from me. Now he was going to travel, we all supported him.

Rabon did not accompany me to Warri. He stayed back to visit his family and spend the weekend. He must have been exhausted. Three days of very little sleep was a little too much even for a bulky man like Rabon. I drove back to Warri but not alone.

"Warri," a middle-aged woman called as I drove out of town. She was standing by the side of the road and was well dressed. I did not see her face, but was glad to give her a lift. I needed company for the long journey ahead of me. I was visibly tired.

As soon as she got into the van she held my hand. "My name nar Clara," she said.

"Where you dey go?" I asked a little amazed at her open-minded disposition.

"Ughelli. I know you. Nor be you be the new Chief Engineer?"

"Who tell you?"

"I dey see you every day for town. I even wan come meet you make you give me granite supply. I be contractor." She was sitting close to me now in the front seat, her arms wrapped around my shoulders. She was being friendly, I thought. We were a few miles away from Benin when she asked me to stop. She wanted to use the bathroom. I looked for a convenient place to stop. She just opened the door and stood in front of me easing herself. She made sure I saw her body. I began to shake. My heart pounded as I watched and she seemed to like my staring at her bare body. I got the message. As soon as she got into the car she reached for my hands and sent my fingers under her underwear. She screamed as I worked my way up her body. There were few cars on the road and we had enough time to feel each other's warmth. It also

consolidated my tiredness.

“I like you well well. You go help me?”

“I know where you dey stay.”

The driving was tedious. She talked throughout the journey just to keep me awake, and cautioned me almost anytime there was an oncoming vehicle. We arrived in Ughelli a little late in the evening and she insisted on coming home with me. She said she needed to know me better. She did not live with her husband. He left her with her children, and she had been responsible for them ever since. She was a petty contractor, supplying sand and granite to building sites. She traded in her spare time. She had connections with major contractors.

“I go send my pikin come cook for you,” she said as she left early in the morning. She was trying to cement our friendship.

In the mornings, I would wake up, sometimes late in the morning to meet a crowd in front of my house. The machine operators and workers would wait patiently for the Chief Engineer to wake up and give instructions to them. They would not go to work until they got orders from me. Sometimes I gave the orders in advance the previous day. Many times they would only work a few hours. The boss had a hangover from too much alcohol the previous night.

I opened my door that evening to see a young girl standing. She was well dressed and pretty. Her dress was short, and revealed well rounded knees and straight legs. She wore curly hair and make up. Her eye lashes were lined with purple and light blue colours to complement her dress. Her high-heeled shoes gave her an expression of grace and elegance. I was in luck, I thought.

“I am Joan,” she said, breaking the electrifying silence. “Clara’s daughter.”

I had forgotten Clara and never connected this beautiful girl with the lady who just spent the night with me.

“Come in. What can I offer you?” I said, as I quickly sent the official driver to buy drinks.

We talked about her school and got familiar. I assumed she had known me through a friend, and never bothered to ask about her family. She cooked a meal for me, and became my constant companion anytime I was alone in the house. It took a month before I knew she was the daughter of the lady who had

accompanied me from Benin to Ughelli. Her mother actually wanted her to date me. She thought I was suitable for her daughter.

It took me four months to be totally bored with my routine. I went to the site only a few times. It was the early stages of a road construction. There were no designers, and no engineers to supervise my project. I was the designer and contractor. It was a case of the blind leading the blind. I was not ready to be a boss yet. I needed experience. Money was not my challenge at this time. I had no responsibilities. The fat wages only increased my recklessness. I acquired a few items of furniture and bought a few household items. I was preparing to make a home now.

The official driver was tense on our journey to Kwale. He was sad.

“Oga, you go take me go your new company?”

“If I get official car I go send for you. But the money nor reach your pay now o,” I cautioned.

Raphael wanted to work with me. He enjoyed the freedom and extras I always gave him. I told him I was leaving the company and he was unhappy. I gave him foodstuff I no longer wanted, and a few clothes. Raphael was a good boy. He was liked by my female friends for his loyalty. He never gave any of my secrets away.

Chief Akona was shocked by my decision. He did not understand how the lack of challenges could make a young man abandon a salary of ₦7000 per annum to fall back on a salary of ₦3800 per annum.

“I will employ a white man as Managing Director,” he pleaded. He was aware I was leaving because of the lack of opportunity to gain experience and the lack of challenges on the job. Chief Akona loved me. He practically sent me foodstuffs anytime a driver was coming to Ughelli. He was proud of employing a top consulting engineer in his construction firm.

“I am going back for my Masters degree in September,” I lied. “I would consider coming back to head this construction team,” I assured him. It was the only way to stop him.

I resumed work the next day in Benin. I never actually stopped working for the firm. I ran the affairs of the company from Ughelli. Etteh was right. He was pleased to have me back.

“Look, my friend, you will go to Surrey to study Bridge Engineering,” Etteh said. It sounded as if he needed to tie me down to the company. I had just told him I was back to Benin and had resumed work. I didn’t need to reapply. I was family, and Etteh knew I left because of the treatment I got from Onyebuchi and Mr Akampa. I was glad to be back.

Fabulous returned soon after I moved to Benin from Ughelli. He was not too comfortable with my decision, but had no control over my decisions. The house was full. We were about twelve adults living in the house. The university was closed down due to students’ unrest and Staffy’s friends came to live with Fabulous. It was like a camp of equals. Fabulous had an incredible heart. He did not secure a master’s bedroom. Anybody slept anywhere they liked. Sometimes he would sleep in the living room. He only slept in the master’s bedroom when he had a female visitor.

Fabulous bought the state of the art disco equipment from London, it was loud and had a lot of effects. Soon he rented an abandoned art gallery and set up the equipment. Genesis Funk House was born. It became a club for the elite. The stewards, barmen, and service hands were students of the University of Benin. We took turns working in the night club. The music power was tremendous and we soon became the talk of the town.

Engr. Ekwu was from the eastern part of the country. He was transferred to Benin to work as a structural engineer. He worked with me. He was also from Ahmadu Bello University, and we knew ourselves well in school. Ekwu became the resident engineer/manager of the Benin office. He was a loyalist of the firm and represented their interests in Benin. He was also loyal to our mutual friendship and provided me with whatever facilities I wanted. He did not boss me. We went on well, and soon I was back in Ibadan. There were projects I had to work on. I settled down with a friend I had met in Benin. He was doing his National Service and was a friend. Sometimes he stayed with us in Benin. He was engaged in the military as a medical personnel. Dr Ogunkoya was a captain in the army, and lived in the Government Reservation Area of Ibadan in one of the houses owned by the army. It was an old colonial building and had two bedrooms in the house. There was a servant’s quarters. I did not want to stay in a hotel.

“Welcome, Eric,” Aro said as soon as I arrived in the office from Benin.

“How’s Benin, I hear you are now a disc jockey?” he said laughing, and almost immediately announced some new benefits for me. It was as if I was being promoted for leaving the firm.

“Erico, you must change your car,” he said. “There are fine cars now for young men in Molete. Go and meet the accountant. He will settle you.” That week I bought a sports car. It had alloy rims and 16ins wide tires. It was a speed machine. It was a brand introduced to Nigeria. Many young graduates bought the brand. Mine was special because of the tires. It was specially sold to me by the Italian manager himself.

Etteh gave me special assignments. I was placed in the structural section and charged with the responsibility of designing bridges. It was to prepare me for my intended studies. I worked directly under Etteh’s supervision. He was a brilliant engineer and taught me a lot.

I spent all my weekends in Benin. I left Ibadan every Friday at about 3 pm, and arrived Benin usually at 6 pm. It was a routine, and my speed car ensured I arrived on time for Genesis. Genesis was a way of life. The boys met there every weekend. I gave a lift to Pedi on one of my trips to Benin. She was extremely beautiful. She was 17. Pedi had been standing by the roadside at the outskirts of Ibadan. She was going to Emevor for the weekend. She was going to collect money for her school. She was Isoko, and was the only girl from Bendel State in the Girls’ School in Ibadan. She was in the 5th form, and said she was going for her examination enrolment fees. She was happy for the ride. She would be coming back with me if she could meet me in Benin before my departure for Ibadan. Pedi was a nice girl.

“I like you,” I said almost immediately she entered.

“Thank you. Do you live in Ibadan?” she asked.

“I work in Ibadan and Benin.”

We stopped to eat at Ore. There was a nice restaurant I always ate at on these journeys. Pedi was hungry and also drank a small bottle of stout. She liked drinking although not heavily. We talked throughout the trip to Benin and were in no hurry to get home. By the time we arrived in Benin, we were holding hands like a long-time couple. We were attracted to each other. I have found

a girl, I thought. Pedi spent the entire weekend with me. She only travelled on Saturday for a few hours and was back. We spent time in Genesis. She told me she was a virgin, and I never demanded anything from her. We would kiss and talk and share bright ideas on our future. I decided I was going to marry her. It was not yet time to propose, she still had to finish school.

Pedi practically stayed with me in Ibadan. Dr Ogunkoya gave her a spare key and she could come and go anytime she liked. At weekends, she would come with her friend, Bola, and we would either go to Benin or spend the weekend together in Ibadan. Dr Ogunkoya was usually away on some military assignment, or visiting family. We enjoyed dancing in the night club, and Bola drank a lot. Sometimes she would be drunk and would want me to sleep with her. I never did. She was my fiancé's friend. Soon Dr Ogunkoya joined our party. We went out together. He liked Bola. Bola was robust and had large breasts. She had big buttocks which she enjoyed shaking deliberately to get noticed. She was also friendly and Dr Ogunkoya could not resist her for long. He started sleeping with her, and it was an everyday affair. Bola loved it and loved tormenting us in the next room. She knew there was inactivity there. I could sense she was uncomfortable. Pedi was not doing the same thing with me. Bola liked my company and would have loved to trade places with Pedi. I would have settled down well with her, except that she was from an elitist family in the West, and had reservations for Midwesterners. I was from the MidWest.

One weekend, Pedi went with me to Benin. We had just received our monthly salary. I usually kept my wages in my pockets and watched it drain. I bought a few things in Ibadan, changed my clothes and headed for Benin. The weekends were usually busy. We arranged things in the night club and manned the gates and service areas. We arrived on time. I had been allowed to travel before the end of the work day. It was pay day and my bosses knew I had to travel. Pedi was moody throughout the trip. She would not eat in my popular restaurant, and would not even come down from the car while I ate.

"I just want to rest," she said. "The journey is stressful."

I didn't think much of it. I just rushed my meal and we were on our way. Soon we were in Benin. Staffy was preparing to go

out to buy drinks. He made most of the purchases. He was sometimes the cook. Adewale was the electronics guru in the house. He made sure the systems worked well. We were all a team, the students of the university and young professionals. We were the Genesis family. I settled down to blend into all the excitement.

“I want money to pay my school fees,” Pedi said with a frown. It seemed she was rehearsing those words all day. Was that what made her sad throughout the journey? It seemed rather late in the term to pay school fees, I thought. She had gone home during an earlier visit for school fees. I was uncomfortable with the request but reached for my shirt pockets to get some money for her. Empty! I had forgotten the shirt in Ibadan. It did not matter anyhow. I would collect money from sales tonight and give her if necessary.

“You don’t want to give me money. Only two thousand naira. If you don’t give me now I will go back to Ibadan,” she said rather in an angry tone. I could not understand and before I had time to explain my back-up plan, she stormed out of the house. I was surprised at this sudden turn, but thought she was coming back. Pedi never showed up again. I looked everywhere but Pedi was gone. What had I done to this girl? I was restless.

The disappearance of Pedi from Benin was a great surprise to me. I was going to give her the money when we got back to Ibadan. Was it premeditated? Did she want to dump me? We had such great moments together and I thought I had found a wife. I even mentioned my intentions to her on several occasions. Why did she run away? I was in search of a partner. I wanted to live an organised life, and for the third time I had been dumped.

That year, I focused on upgrading my CV. I sat for and passed my professional examinations and became a member of the Nigerian Society of Engineers, the Association of Bridges and Structural Engineers and the Institution of Highway Engineers. Etteh made sure I had these qualifications added to my degree in engineering. He was preparing me for the course in the United Kingdom. I joined the Ibadan Recreation Club, and by extension the Benin Recreation Club. They were elite clubs and offered cheap drinks and food. I never played golf or tennis, and my membership became a call to drinking. I spent all my weekends in Benin.

There was business to take care of in Genesis. I soon finished my assignments in Ibadan and returned to Benin to supervise the construction of the University Teaching Hospital building projects. I had designed them with Onyebuchi and they had been awarded for construction. It was my last assignment before I was due to leave for the United Kingdom.



London Boy

The airport was busy. People walked in different directions. The atmosphere was exciting. Not even the thunderous sounds of jet engines in the background diluted the noise that came from the hearts of relatives wishing their loved ones journey mercies. There were a few tears of joy and many hugs. Everyone was busy doing something. I was not. I was alone and filled with thoughts. Was I going to heaven? This was not the same airport Agbetegbe used when he travelled to London. I was in the International Airport and it was huge. This was my first flight to a foreign country, but I was not scared. I was only alone, but confident.

Fabulous told me about international travels. I was going for my Master's programme in Bridge Engineering at the University of Surrey. It was an evening flight. London was once our colonial headquarters, and I expected a city of lights and fast moving trains. I had heard wonderful things about London and did not know what to expect. Captain Sam was my classmate in Government College, Ughelli. He was the captain of the DC10 that was to fly us to London. It was comforting. I always visited him in the Aviation School in Zaria when he trained as a pilot. He was a good pilot. We sat in the lounge and talked about London. It is a big city, he said and has fast night life. I was going to the civilised world.

The view from my window seat was exciting. There were luscious patches of green in well organised layouts. The houses were of archaic architecture with peculiar rooftops different from the types I was used to in Nigeria, but were well organised with streets lined with street lights still shining on straight and paved roads. We arrived in a large airport and I was soon in the streets of London. I took a taxi. I was going to the heart of London. Tunde lived in Arsenal and was expecting me. We were classmates

at Ahmadu Bello University. He studied Chemistry and was now a computer scientist in London with a family. As we drove to the heart of London, a frown gathered around my face. Was this London? Hardly better than Surulere in Lagos, I thought. The neighbourhood in Benin GRA where I lived seemed better. Tunde lived next door to the Arsenal Football Stadium. There was a match going on and Tunde had tickets for the match. It was to be my welcome party. Tunde Jr. accompanied us to the match. He was an Arsenal fan. I watched two matches. Watching over Tunde Jr. was more exciting than the Arsenal match. He was an active kid and if you missed a moment, Tunde Jr. could be the twelfth player on the pitch. He was fun to play with.

Tunde took me out that evening. I was not to resume studies for the next 3 weeks, so we went out for a night out. He took me to Soho. Soho was the red-light district of London, and that was my favourite pastime. There were several small but well lit door labels announcing the occupants of the apartments. One had the inscription 'Hot British, 20'. We settled for that apartment. An elderly lady welcomed us in. She was not hot and her wrinkles penetrated her overpainted face make-up. She was certainly not twenty. She was the secretary who took care of her clients. In Soho the red-light district of London, this was an office of the hooker. She interviewed me and charged me accordingly. "My boss likes Africans," the secretary told me. Tunde waited for me in another room.

"They say you have strong passions for women. Can you take good care of me?" she asked as it became my turn to see the 'Hot British' lady. She was hot.

"I am from Nigeria," I said, a little excited. It was the first time I was going to sleep with a white woman. She was British, middle-aged and had golden brown hair falling on her shoulders. She wore only panties and lay on the bed inviting me. I was sheepish and did not exactly know what to do. There was some protocol to this, I thought.

"Come to me," she said, sticking out her tongue. Her large breasts shone in the dim room and her lips parted. It was the signal I needed. I had hardly taken off my clothes when she drew me close and planted a kiss on my tummy. She never stopped kissing my body. For a brief moment I thought I was with a lover

and not a hooker.

“Show me you are a Nigerian,” she shouted as I began fumbling with her body. The secretary shut the connecting door to shut out the rather loud noises coming from her, and they were really loud. She practically shouted and scratched at my back. She could have passed for a sports commentator as I pounded away. At the end she would not let go. But for her busy schedule we would have had a return bout. There were other clients waiting. We talked for a while after, and she made me promise I would be a regular caller. She would not be charging me, she said. This was my first night in Britain and I had been given a taste of British hospitality.

At the door, a wild looking pot-bellied man asked me? “How was it?”

“Fine,” I said.

“Did she?” he asked starry-eyed. You could see a wild excitement in his looks.

“Yes,” I said. I did not understand that part of the interview, but I was in a hurry to leave the premises. Tunde was waiting for me downstairs. He took me to a night club. It was an exclusive club and he had a card. The waitresses served half nude. There was quite a night life in London, I thought, but not exceptional. I preferred my good old Gondola night club in Yaba and Africa Shrine. The local club girls in Lagos were cheaper.

The next day I bought a car. It cost 100 pounds. I had about 3000 pounds as my pocket money. I was a rich student. Etteh had made sure I had enough money to spend, and Fabulous had given me money too. The car was a Ford Cortina. It was a hatch back. I wanted to be mobile, and not depend on the public transport system. I was a car owner in Nigeria.

The next day, Tunde and I made the trip to Guildford. Guildford was forty miles away from London. The trip was an adventure. Tunde plotted the route while I drove. He had a map with him, and directed me as we proceeded on the trip. The journey was exciting and challenging. I drove on the right. We used to drive on the right in Nigeria and only changed a few years back to the left. I had to make adjustments to my driving, but I drove well. It was my first journey in Britain. We arrived early in the morning and I soon settled down to a room. Registration was smooth and

I had no problem locating my apartment and faculty. It was a fairly small campus, unlike the Ahmadu Bello University. Tunde spent the night with me. I still had a few days to the start of school. We parked the car in school and took the surface train to London the next day. It was also the opportunity to know my way around.

Engr. Oyemi had just graduated from the school. He made a diploma in Advanced Structural Engineering. Before my arrival he sent a message to Etteh. He had run out of money and needed a ticket to return after his course to Nigeria. I volunteered to give him my return ticket. Nigeria Airways did not object to ticket transfers. As soon as I got to London, I phoned Mike and sent him the ticket by post as he had instructed. I was going to buy another ticket because I had plans to go to Nigeria for the Christmas holidays.

My first day in school was miserable. The professor came in and greeted. He stooped slightly and had spectacles on. I liked him and was engrossed in his welcome speech. In less than five minutes, the blackboard was full. I did not understand a word of what he taught. He taught us special structures. He was a renowned professor and gave lectures all over the world. He was the proponent of space structures and was a consultant to space research institutes all over the world. What have I got myself into? Onyebuchi was my classmate now. We were both sponsored by the firm. Onyebuchi enjoyed the lecture. He had notes full and went immediately to the library to research. I was miserable. I left wealth and fun to come to school. I did not need this school, I thought. I was an engineer, with a good job and security. I could be a big businessman if I wanted. It took a long time to settle down to learning again. Every lecture was hell for me. Was I a dullard? Or was I just lazy? Etteh had told me I would not make it. It was a difficult course and almost all the engineers sponsored by the firm only managed to obtain the university diploma and not the master's degree. I knew how to pass exams and did not give up.

Weekend was a welcome relief from the frustrations. I had made many friends. Dander Singh was an Indian. He came from India for his Master's, and Mr Reti Victor came from Strathclyde. He was a Nigerian who had studied for his first degree in Britain.

He was married to a British girl and had a daughter. We were quick to become good friends. We met in the school pub and struck it fast. We wanted to explore the town, and my car provided the necessary machine for our exploits. We went to the local pub almost every night for a quick beer.

The Afro-Caribbean Society was organising a welcome party for Afro-Caribbean freshmen. It was a popular event and the perfect opportunity for us to meet the black girls in town. We decided to attend. In front of my door was a parcel, addressed to me. The handwriting was peculiar. I thought it was not a Nigerian. It was typically British style. I opened the parcel to find my ticket with a note from Engr Oyemi. He had an alternative ticket for use and did not use my ticket anymore. I never knew who dropped the parcel or how the courier identified my room.

The party was just what we wanted. Girls from the Nursing school in town came in droves. There were three friends. Carol was particularly beautiful. She was my exact height, slim and fair-skinned. She wore a short skirt which revealed a pair of straight and smooth legs. She was very well endowed and had the poise of a beauty queen. She was everybody's toast. Dander liked Elora. Elora was big and had a large bottom. She also had large breasts and was dark-skinned. Reti had no choice but to settle for Marian. Marian was a British citizen. She smoked profusely just like Carol. The three girls danced together and we decided to strike at them on the dance floor. I engaged Carol on the dance floor, Dander went for Elora and Reti danced with Marian. Carol and I smoked while dancing and we seemed to like each other. It was common to exchange partners, and we swapped partners every time the disc jockey changed tunes. Soon we were all sitting together, chatting. We were in luck that night. We introduced ourselves. I was the fresh one from Nigeria, and became the toast of the girls.

"You are very rich in Nigeria," Elora said. "Most of you are sons of chiefs. I like Nigeria."

"My country is beautiful," I said, proudly Nigerian. "We are not all sons of chiefs. There are not many chiefs from the part I come from."

"Where are you from?" Elora asked me. Her eyes were fixed on me and she made sure she dominated the discussions. She

never allowed Carol to answer some of my questions. It was clear she was the leader in this group. She was highly respected.

“Benin City.”

“I knew somebody from Ibadan,” she said.

“That’s where I was working before coming to England,” I said.

“Carol, would you like to have the next dance?” I asked, standing up to dance.

Elora stood up.

“Carol is tired,” she said as she dragged me to one corner of the dance floor to start dancing with me. My eyes were fixed on Carol while we danced. Soon Carol was on the dance floor with Dander. We were to switch partners traditionally, but Elora would not let go. We had to dance all night together. Elora liked dancing with me, and the others had to let her. She was in charge. We danced late into the night and we offered to give them a ride after the dance. We were not sure we could lure them into our rooms to spend the night, so we played the gentleman.

“Eric can drop us now,” Elora announced, pointing at another girl. They were now four girls. We offered to squeeze into the five seats of my Ford Cortina. That would afford us ‘lapping’ opportunities and get us more connected, but Elora would have none of that.

“Eric would be safe. Don’t worry now,” she said in her Jamaican accent. The car ran well and had a car stereo. I played blues while we drove to their hostel. Elora liked the selection and sang all the way. We were all a little high on alcohol. We drank beer. I paid all the bills for the drinks, and stood out as the new rich kid on the block. I stopped in front of a storey building. The three girls got down. Carol said goodnight and went inside. I waited for Elora to get down. “My hostel is in front. I am in the seniors section.” She was in final year. The others were fresh women, except Marian. Carol was the youngest.

“I don’t want you to miss your way around town now,” she said as we got to her hostel. “I would accompany you home.”

“But, I can manage,” I tried to protest, but she just smiled and put her arms around me. “I am going with you,” she said emphatically. My lucky day, I thought.

I drove my car straight to the campus. I could have really

missed the way. It was winding and long. We missed many of the turns. She was not an expert herself. She had not driven that way before. I parked near my room window and she accompanied me right into the room. I did not need to invite her in. She undressed as soon as I closed the door and put on a transparent night dress. She obviously came prepared to sleep. Soon we were in each other's arms. We hardly slept. She told me the long story of observing my cute little behaviour at the dance party and the meeting they had held concerning their sharing formula. I was hers. Elora never left my room again. In less than two weeks she had practically moved in with me. Carol and the other girls came to visit her in my room. She showed me off as her boyfriend. Elora choked me with lovemaking. She demanded my attention every day, and kept my room safe even when I left for London to visit. Was I married?

I spent most weekends in London. It was a way to get out of Elora's 'unending occupation'.

Contempo Record Store was a shop in London that stocked new labels. It was a shop specifically set up to test the marketability and popularity of new records released for the market. It was like a testing ground, especially for new artistes. Every weekend new record releases were sent to the store in London to test the market. The records usually arrived at about 10 am. I would be waiting. The disc jockey knew me. I usually stood at the edge of the counter, while he played the records. If I danced or shook my head to the rhythm, it was kept for me. I usually bought over twenty records. I was the model customer. Most of the reggae albums usually never get into the market. They were cut by unknown artists but I bought them. The very best. I would send the records to my classmate, Capt. Sam, and they would be delivered to Staffy in Benin. Genesis Funk House, Benin played the very latest of labels, sometimes about six months before they reached the Nigerian markets. Genesis was a household name. We were on top of the music market.

I met Carol on the train to Guildford. I had just bought records from London. I would test them in my room and eliminate some before shipping them to Benin City. Carol wanted to come with me to my apartment in school but was scared of Elora. She wanted me but Elora had declared her boundaries. I was hers. Carol and

I planned a date outside Guildford. She had a friend in another county and we arranged to go there the next weekend. She would meet me in the Cathedral grounds near my school on Saturday morning. I packed a few things for the weekend. I stocked the car with beer and cigarettes. I wore a light brown jean suit, and wove my hair in corn rows. It was quite a liberal fashion, and I could pass for a music idol. Carol wore jeans too. She may have been determined to claim her man on that day because we really liked ourselves, in spite of Elora's dominance. She wore a transparent top and made sure her breasts were available for grabs. She had make-up designed to trap anyone who dared look. She was really beautiful. Perhaps I was not used to seeing her in the bright sunlight. We had only met one night at the Afro-Caribbean Night in my school and a few times when I went to see Elora in their hostel in town. I had told Elora I was not a girl person and could not hold hands with her in moonlight or give her bouquets of flowers as real lovers do.

We drove for about an hour down a winding road. We had a few drinks and sang along as James Brown echoed in the car stereo. She sat close to me and had her hands over my shoulders as I drove. We passed a police car on the way. There were two policemen in the car and they seemed to be on leisure. Suddenly they blew their sirens and motioned on me to stop. I pulled out of the road and waited.

"Step out of the car," he ordered leaning into my window and checking the contents in the back seat. I came down smiling. I was in a good mood.

"Who are you?" he asked rather awkwardly.

"Tunde Ekelolu," I lied. "I live in London." He was writing on his note-pad as he asked the questions. He reached for an equipment in his car and asked me to breathe into it. He must have been testing my alcohol intake level. Carol watched smiling.

"My fiancé," I said before he could ask about her identity.

"Driver's licence?"

"I left it in London. I was washing the car myself this morning."

"Report to the nearest police station and show them your licence. Have a good trip you two." He was a friendly policeman, and thought we were on some form of lovers' vacation.

We spent the night in a small motel a few miles away and

made the best out of it. Carol told me they never crossed Elora's path. She had facilitated their emigration to Britain and was a big influence on their lives. We agreed never to disclose our small indiscretion.

I came from lectures with Onyebuchi to find Staffy in my room. He was sipping a beer. Elora was happy to see a friend from Nigeria. It was her chance to show she was eligible. It was a pleasant surprise.

"Staffy nor mind this one o. E just dey rush me," I said, putting the records straight. Elora did not understand Pidgin English.

"What are you doing in England?" I finally asked. Fabulous was upgrading the club's disco equipment and had sent Staffy to buy another one. Elora had to go to her hostel. It was a chance to be alone with my friend for once and have peace. Staffy and I went to town and visited a few night clubs. He wanted to taste the local girls. I did not know the spots in Guildford. The next day we went to London to buy the equipment and some records from Contempo Stores. We finished shopping for musical equipment and I took Staffy to my Soho customer. She did not remember who I was, and treated Staffy with the same professional touch.

Staffy and I had a wonderful time in Guildford. He spent all the time with me in Guildford. We drove around the night clubs in town and had a few flings when we got lucky. We usually came home late. Elora never showed up to spend the night when Staffy was around. On our way, we would visit her just to keep up appearances. On one bank holiday, we were returning from the club when we ran out of cigarettes. Staffy smoked as much as I did, and we needed cigarettes. We went to the campus to ask a few friends of mine who smoked but never found any. We went to town and combed all the vending machines in Guildford and environs. They were all empty. We had to smoke, so we headed for London. It was a 40-mile journey in search of cigarettes. We found one in Soho with only two packets left in the vending machine, after a three-hour desperate search. We managed to get a light from a man who lay by the roadside. He was smoking pot. He was kind enough to give us a light. Staffy and I reviewed the operations on our long journey back. It was foolish, we thought. We got home at 4 am. The next day the shops opened at 9 am.

We had only smoked four sticks out of the packets we bought. It was not our popular brand.

Staffy soon left for Nigeria. We went to London and stayed with Tunde for a day before his flight. He took us to street market shops where we had bargain sales. Staffy and I bought presents for the folks at home. Fabulous was a good brother and we made sure we showed appreciation.

A few months later, I was invited to the security office at the gate. I had a visitor and I was to meet him there. I had just come from lectures. I was well groomed in a black suit and blue tie. I was scheduled to meet the faculty head in two hours and had dressed well. At the gate, a police car was parked and two Policemen sat in the office. I recognised them. They were the same two policemen who had accosted Carol and I in the nearby county.

“Are you the owner of this car?” he asked pointing at my car. It was parked near the gate. I parked there most times.

“Yes.”

“Tunde Ekelolu?” the policeman asked, referring to his notes.

“No. My name is Eric Ikogho. I am a Master’s degree student studying Bridge Engineering in this university.”

“Do you know Ekelolu?” he asked looking strangely at me. “He is a Jamaican. Did you give him your car at any time?”

“I hardly have time to drive this car. Most times these boys steal the car. It has been stolen several times. I don’t even need the car anymore.” I was playing victim of racial prejudice. The police would be uncomfortable with that posture. We were sacred cows. Postgraduate students were regarded highly in Britain, especially foreigners. We paid much higher fees.

“I’m sorry, Sir, for taking your time. Be more careful with your car. Do you have a licence?”

“Yes. My Nigerian licence is current.”

Foolish people, I thought. I recognised the same man. He had no idea I was the same person he had caught on the road. I looked like a Jamaican. He never asked me. He assumed I was a British black boy. I used the car sparingly now. Most times just to visit town and get groceries. I sometimes visited the nurses hostel to sneak a visit to Carol. The weather was not friendly at this time. It was winter, and the roads were slippery. I was also settled in

my academics and spent more time in the laboratory. Dander, Reti and I were reading partners and spent long hours in the library. When we got bored and wanted fun, we went to London. I would call the cab company for a car and spend some time in a restaurant in London. The cab drivers liked us. We were generous with tips and usually invited them out with us when we got to pub houses. On one of our trips to London we visited Tunde. Dander accompanied me, and Tunde Jr. never stopped asking him questions about India. He was given permission by his mum to accompany us to Guildford.

Tunde Jr. was a spectacle in school. Everyone invited him to his room, and Elora even took him to her hostel for two days. He never stopped asking questions. Tunde Jr was four, and could contribute in any discussion. He was a pleasant kid. When I was away for lectures, Tunde Jr. would be busy entertaining other students in their rooms. He had invitations from almost everyone. Lucile was particularly fond of Tunde Jr. She was a Ugandan girl studying for her first degree in Business Management. She was sponsored by her government and had stayed in England for about 4 years. She was in her final year in the university, and stayed on the top floor in the adjacent female block. Her window was visible from my ground floor window. Sometimes she would signal Tunde Jr. to come to her room. Lucile was beautiful, and spoke with an accent. When she brought Tunde back, she would take tea in my room. We talked about Africa. I told her much about Nigeria. She knew Nigerians as wealthy people. Our currency exchanged well, and you could buy a car with your basic travel allowance.

Lucile became fond of me after Tunde Jr. left. We spent time together, mostly in the school coffee shop. It was safer there and we soon began seeing each other. Many times she would invite me to her room, and go with me on my trips to London. Elora was the only stumbling block. She was possessive and even tried to control my movements. No one came freely into my room without her approval. She did not have to give it in writing. One look was all you needed to keep your distance.

Winter was quite upsetting for me. How could people enjoy living in the upper chamber of a refrigerator? I was uncomfortable, but took a few pictures. It showed I was abroad.

I could not wait for the Christmas holidays to come. Staffy kept me abreast of happenings in Nigeria. Mama was in touch through him and had written to me a few times. I sometimes shared the letters with Elora. She knew I missed my country and did not like it in Britain. She sometimes mentioned an intention to explore Nigeria. Not with me! Most of her discussions now centred on her dreams of marriage and settling down to raise children. She fancied babies that looked like me and always dreamt of a life in Nigeria with Eric. I just ignored her. Maybe she thought she could extract a marriage proposal from me. I was not in love.

We queued patiently in well-organised lines at the Heathrow Airport. The Nigeria Airways counter was always a sight to behold. It looked like a busy marketplace. Boxes littered everywhere, some the size of large trunk boxes and in large heaps. Women negotiated with light travellers to assist with some of their luggage. I had two pieces. I had done extensive shopping for friends in Benin. There were a handful of materials for Genesis. This was Christmas and we usually had very large sales in the festive seasons. I missed my country. I was glad to escape from the cold weather to sunshine Nigeria. Most of the passengers were glad also and we talked about the new government. The Civil War was over and we were preparing for the Festival of Arts and Culture. Nigeria was the centrepiece of the black civilisation. As soon as we touched down on the tarmac, everyone scrambled to access his carry-on baggage. Typical Nigerians, I thought. As soon as we all disembarked and headed for customs and immigration in a really mad rush, there was a blackout.

“NEPA,” we all screamed. It showed we were home, and for some strange reason I liked it. This was my country. We were checked into hotels by the airline. My final destination was Benin City.

Staffy and Kunlus came to meet me at the airport. Kunlus is Adewale. I was glad to be home.

“How’s Elora?” Staffy asked. He knew of Elora. “I replied the letter for Mama.”

“What letter?” I asked, dumbfounded. Elora wrote a letter to Mama, informing her of her agreement to marry her son, and Mama was excited. Her son was getting married to a white girl. The anger welled in me. It was not a warm welcome celebration.

"I know what to do, Staffy," I assured. Staffy was laughing. He knew Elora was a desperate woman, and his friend was not going to fall for cheap gimmicks. We now lived in the Government Reservation Area in Benin City. The house had been allocated to Fabulous. He was head of the Federal Office in Bendel State. That night, I made a new friend in Genesis. She was from the Niger Delta. She was a good dancer and we struck it on the dance floor. She came with her friends and it was easy to take her away from them. I was a part owner of a night club, young, single and studying abroad. I showed some style, and loved reggae music. It was for the elite. She was now mine. I did not leave the country with any serious relationship, and Elora capitalised on this. Now I was prepared to face her. Ebitimi was dark, tall and beautiful. She would pass for a model. She wore long hair and had an inviting smile. It revealed small, even, white teeth. Her eyes were clean and seemed protected by hairy long, curly eyelashes. She wore heavy make-up. We lived together in the GRA throughout the holidays until I moved to Lagos after the New Year.

I attended the end-of-year party organised by my firm in Ibadan. It was also a chance to see Etteh.

"Did you receive your ticket?" Mr Oyemi asked me. "I sent it through my pejerito. I had a West Indian Pejerito in Guildford. Did you meet Elora and her friends?"

'Pejerito' was a term we used to describe casual sex partners. We referred to stray girls as *pejeritos*. Elora was a *pejerito*.

"No," I lied, a little surprised. I had been taken for a ride by Elora. She was the one who left the ticket in front of my door in school. She was my boss's mistress in Guildford. Oyemi was married and Elora had found fresh meat. Elora and her friends were on a hunt for Nigerian husbands. The picture stared me in the face. I was unattached in Nigeria, and Elora preferred me. She never gave me anytime to find out about her affair with Oyemi. She knew Oyemi was my boss. Now I had Ebitimi, I thought.

Wally worked in Lagos with an architectural firm in Victoria Island. He was successful and lived in a flat at Anthony Village. It was an exclusive area. I set out to meet him in the office. He was expecting me. I passed by a bus stop along the Ikorodu road, when two uniformed men started running towards me and calling my name. I stopped, embarrassed.

“Engineer, Oga wan see you.” I looked around me to make sure they were talking to me. They were now standing right in front of me with definite orders to bring me before their boss. They could not be harmful, I thought, so I followed them. We went into a large yard. There were artisans busy working on machines. Everyone greeted me courteously as if I was an inspector. A young lady met us at the door to a large waiting room and motioned for me to come with her. She led the way to a staircase, it was rugged, and air-conditioned. This was a relief. I was just coming from the streets of Lagos. It was hot. She walked by my side. She must have been well rehearsed, because she bowed with a smile as she introduced her object of discovery to the boss.

A young man sat behind the big chair. It was obvious he was the boss. I became curious. Who was this bold man. I had gone through about 30 minutes of identity parade to come here and was now curious to know the ending part. The young man started laughing. He definitely knew I was the man he wanted to see. I thought he looked familiar.

“Engr. Eric,” he said with his arms stretched toward me. “Don’t tell me you don’t know me.”

I could not guarantee my complete sense faculties. I had taken a few bottles of beer.

“I am Mr Poloni.”

My eyes popped.

“Yes, Mr Poloni of the Petroleum Training Institute. I am now on my own. I started this company two years ago. You can see I am now a big contractor. Please, sit down. Have a cigar.”

Mr Poloni was my great friend in Warri. The same contractor I had assisted with his mistakes in the foundation. He was excited. Soon, almost all the top management staff in his company were in the office to greet me.

“I never imagined a Nigerian would refuse money from a contractor and instead give him money,” he told his colleagues. I had two hours with them. I drank so much whisky, and went home with a box of Italian cigars. It was his chance to tell me thank you, and I was a proud man. Mr Poloni took me personally in his car to Wally’s office.

“Good man,” he said as I introduced him to Wally. “Very good

engineer,” he said to Wally. Mr Poloni knew the best parting gift for me, £200, and drove off before I had time to recognise he had just given me money. He made sure I couldn’t say no. I needed money!

The winter was biting when we arrived Heathrow Airport in January. I went straight to Guildford. I had a lot of studies to catch up on. Onyebuchi was unhappy I was playing with my studies. He did not travel to Nigeria for the Christmas. He stayed back in school to study. I was determined to do away with distractions from Elora. I put an enlarged photo of Ebitimi on my reading table. As soon as Elora walked into my room, I confronted her before she could say welcome.

“I cannot continue with you any longer,” I said. “I came here to study, not to marry.”

She was staring at Ebitimi’s photo on my table. She did not look surprised or angry.

“Too late,” she said smiling. “I am carrying your baby.”

“I will never marry you,” I said angrily. “Don’t think you can make me marry you.”

“It’s my baby. I can take care of myself,” she said.

Staffy never mentioned the baby in the letter to Mama. Elora had written to tell Mama she was carrying my baby. She thought Mama would discuss with me during the holidays. It was her style. I was too angry to think. Elora was determined to get married to a Nigerian. I was her choice.

Not me!

“Why did you not give it to Oyemi?” Now she knew I had found out her big game. She froze, and left. In the remaining months of my stay in Guildford, Elora never came to my room. She was happy to go. It seemed she had achieved her main objective. Connect with Nigeria through a baby. I was undisturbed. I told Elora in clear language I did not want to marry her.

Lucile practically moved in with me. She always stayed in my room. She was my next problem. She was lonely and needed love. She had attempted suicide twice for heartbreak reasons, and I wouldn’t dare suggest I was leaving her. She told me herself I would be responsible for her final death if I dared leave her. I played the delicate game. Time was short anyway. Exams were getting close, and I was writing my Master’s dissertation. Dander

and Reti were my constant companions now. We studied together and looked after each other.

Dander and Reti were both recommended by Onyebuchi and I for employment in our firm in Nigeria when they finished the programme. Dander was excited. He always wanted to explore the Nigerian market. People knew we had liquid gold and the Nigerians in Britain displayed some of the gold. I did.

I called the cab company to take me to a suburb in London. It was the prestigious Cement and Concrete Institute. It was meant for seasoned researchers and people of substance. My project supervisor worked there. He was particularly interested in my work and supported me immensely. Dander offered to accompany me. A well-balanced woman approached him as he waited for me outside the bank where I had told the cab company to pick me up.

“Eric?” she asked Dander, not sure who she was to pick up. She was the cab driver assigned to me that day. They always assigned their best drivers to pick me. I was a valued customer.

“No, Eric is in the bank. I am his colleague. I would be accompanying him to London,” Dander told her. Dander motioned to me from the car. He was seated in the back seat. I wore a black suit with blue shirt. I had sunshades on. It was summer. I did not notice the driver as I settled down for the journey.

“London,” I told the driver. She moved the car out of the side kerb and we were soon on our way. Dander and I talked most of the time through the journey.

“Have a cigarette,” I told the driver stretching a packet of *Benson & Hedges*.

“No, thanks. I don’t smoke and drive,” she said turning slightly to observe me. She is a woman. I almost gave out my shock at the discovery. We now talked less in the car. We were respecting each other. She knew the Cement and Concrete Institute and soon we arrived. Dander sat back in the car while I hurried to see my supervisor. I was soon out and we set out for Guildford. The cab’s meter was on and we did not want to waste any precious time. On our way back, the driver was fast. She sometimes went beyond the speed limits. Dander yawned and whispered to me. “I am thirsty.” The car swerved, veered to the right and stopped almost immediately in front of a pub.

“Me, too,” said the driver. She had been bottling her thirst and was not sure if we would allow her a small drink. “I am Betsy,” she said laughing. We had more than one drink and smoked in the pub. I bought food and we all ate. Betsy was a lovely lady. She never put on the meter after the drinks. She said she expected Eric to be a rich white kid, not a Nigerian boy. She was a gipsy who lived in a caravan and adopted us as special friends. She was permanently assigned to me by the cab company. I took care of her very well. I scored good grades in my thesis, but had a hard time with the exams. It was difficult, partly because I spent little time with my books. I must have managed to pass, but I made my Master’s degree. By this time Lucile had travelled to Uganda. She needed to renew her scholarship, and this gave me the required break.

Kate Pennington was a postgraduate student of Law. We sometimes met in the cafeteria and exchanged greetings. She was a very friendly person and we usually exchanged gifts. She liked buying chewing gum for me. I gave her choice cigarettes. I was going to London to celebrate and prepare for my journey back to Nigeria, and Miss Pennington offered to go with me. In London, we ate in a restaurant close to the Nigerian Embassy. It was an exclusive restaurant for whites. I liked such places. I could cry racism especially in the company of a white girl. We sat and talked. I was excited at the prospects of going home again.

“I would like to accompany you to Nigeria,” she said gazing into my eyes. “I want to be with you.” It came as a surprise. I was just her friend, I thought, but she wanted more.

“Okay,” I said. “I promise you a good time.” We walked straight into the Nigerian Embassy, and I introduced Kate to the student attaché. I had friends there, and Kate was to go back with her passport the next day. Kate returned to London and obtained a visa to travel to Nigeria. She came back from London with a ticket. Her flight was booked for November. She would be arriving two months after my arrival in Nigeria.

As soon as I arrived in Nigeria I proceeded to Ibadan, and was assigned to special projects. I spent my weekends as usual in Benin. Papa was now seriously ill and was hospitalised. Staffy phoned me when I was preparing for my exams to tell me of Papa’s illness. I thought he told me he was dead, and I cried. I

was glad he was alive when I arrived. Fabulous was preparing to go to London for a Master's degree. He had been offered a scholarship by the federal government. At this time, Papa's condition had worsened and he was in special care in the Teaching Hospital. These were thought to be his last days. Papa was a good man. He sacrificed all he had to give his children education. Now he had high blood pressure and was struggling with his life. As I reflected on his goodness, the tears flowed. Papa washed my car but never rode in it. Papa never spent my money. I did nothing for a man who laid out his comfort for mine. Was I a selfish child? Fabulous bore all the responsibilities for our upkeep. He assisted Papa and Mama to educate the remaining children.

Fabulous was busy, getting his things ready for school. Staffy and I went to see Papa in the hospital. I had not seen him since my arrival. I wanted to tell him I was successful in my Master's degree programme. We got to the hospital at 4 pm. The wards usually allowed visitors at that time. I carried some provisions to deposit at Papa's bedside. He was not on his bed. We scanned through the ward.

"Papa left last night," a friendly voice told us. It was obvious I was Papa's son. I looked every inch like him.

Papa was dead.

Staffy drove me home. My legs were shaking, and my entire life was played before me. The meals at the restaurants with Papa, his old bicycle, his letters to me in the West, his patience and total understanding. His entire trip came before me as the marks of a dignified educationist and father. I had played no part in his life, I thought.

We got home to meet Mama. She had had a bad feeling about Papa the previous night and had come to accompany us on the visit to the hospital.

"We are just from the hospital, Mama. Papa was moved to the general ward this morning. He would be discharged soon. The doctor told us so." I was casual enough for Fabulous and Mama to believe me.

"The doctor ordered total bed rest for Papa. We are not to disturb him for three days. They want to carry out tests on him before he would be due for discharge," we told everyone. That nailed any questions about visiting Papa in the next three days.

Fabulous was due to leave Benin in two days. It would have been difficult to explain his travelling abroad after hearing of his father's death. We had to keep sealed lips, and we did! We took Mama to Warri ourselves. She had rescheduled the visit to Papa for the next day, but we insisted on taking her to Warri ourselves. She also liked a chance to show off in her son's car to neighbours in Warri, so she came with us. It was a narrow escape. Fabulous left for Lagos by air the next day. It was difficult preventing the rumours going the rounds about Papa's death from reaching him. We followed him everywhere he went and fenced off people who approached him from breaking the news. As soon as Fabulous was airborne to Britain, we broke the news to Mama.

"Papa died today," we said. It would have been bad for Fabulous if we had told the truth. The village elders would have imposed fines on him. I was the second son. I was now responsible for the burial.

Miss Pennington arrived Nigeria in the middle of preparations for Papa's burial. I was loaded with plans for the burial. I was expected to complete his abandoned building before the burial. He was to be buried inside a building. He was not to be beaten by rain in his resting place. It was the custom. Etteh Aro gave me all the money and logistics support I needed for the burial and in no time I was ready for my father's final rites. I took Pennington to the Catering Rest House in the Government Reservation Area for lunch, and to the Plaza Motel for dinner. She brought her British driving licence, so I gave her my car to use for the period I'd be away for the burial and I was leaving her alone with the housemaid for a week. She was to take all her meals in these two locations. They were a stone's-throw from the house, and she had the car to explore the city if she wanted. She was very understanding. Mama thought I had brought a wife from England and had even assigned some rites to be performed by her.

The burial ceremony was annoying. The elders tasked me almost non-stop till the end. I was a stranger to my home town and they were determined to punish me. I paid a fine for almost every town ceremony missed by my father's children. Everyone had too much to drink.

Jaman was drunk and made some uncomplimentary remarks about the ceremony. The interment was stopped, and Jaman was

fined by the elders. Jaman was desperately poor. Before now he had been seen in the streets of Warri begging for alms. We had vowed not to help out with his fines. He had prevented his children from giving us Ghana bread when we were young, and the memories of child discrimination and molestation were still fresh in our minds. We let Jaman get out of the mess. At 5 pm, when it was clear that Jaman had no penny on him, I slipped 50 kobo into the hands of my uncle to pay the fine on behalf of Jaman. The fine had been argued down from £500 to 50 kobo and Jaman had been stubborn it seemed. We knew he had no money, and the elders wanted this demonstrated. He was my father's younger brother and was supposed to have backed us up financially. I took all the financial burden with my mother.

We went back to Benin after seven days. I stayed mostly in Warri at night and came to the village to perform the burial rites. Genesis was a booming business. Staffy bought an extra deck when he came to London, and we had opened a branch of Genesis in Warri. We had a full house every weekend and a large turnout on weekdays. Everyone was fascinated with the music power. We featured the latest releases and records not yet released to the market. Warri was quite a rough city. I manned the gate one day. Kate was inside with Staffy and a few friends. They were keeping my white girlfriend busy while I took care of business. I was high on alcohol. I had been drinking brandy all day and was now intoxicated. A known 'mafia king' approached the gate. He was surrounded by two rough looking girls. He just walked towards me, shoved me aside, ordered his two girls in and smiled at me. He was sure I was new in town. I let him settle down on the dance floor. He was dancing with his two girls when I walked behind him, carried him high by the waist and rushed him outside. I threw him on the ground and said, "Pay your gate fees."

Scatter was infuriated.

"Do you know me?" he screamed.

"My name is Stanley Parker," I said laughing. I was a little drunk. Suddenly Carol appeared behind Scatter. She held him by the shoulder to restrain him from his planned onslaught on me. She came with two fierce-looking boys. They must have been smoking hemp. They all had bloodshot eyes and looked agitated.

"Cool down, Eric, na im get Warri."

“You for declare yourself now, Bros,” he said. He obviously respected Carol. Carol was area mother for them in Warri. She was an old hooker and an old ally of mine.

Genesis was a part of our lives. We worked in the night clubs and with Fabulous away, local administration was mainly in the care of Staffy. He took care of business and I only came to help when I was around. We were not astute businessmen and it didn't matter whether we kept books or not. We just had the nite club going for our own fun. A week later, Miss Pennington was due to return to England. Her visit seemed experimental. We could not arrive at an amorous conclusion and she had to leave. I got the car ready for the journey the next day. Her flight was at 10 pm, and we left at about 10 am in the morning. Traffic along the main street into Lagos was hectic. It was a single lane road with many broken patched sections. We spent long hours in traffic, and my car engine began to heat up. The danger signals came on several times and we had to pull over to allow the engine to cool. We arrived the airport at about 6 pm, and Kate just had enough time to check in and travel. She was grateful for the holiday and we kissed at the departure lounge. I needed her, I thought.

I took a decision to leave Lagos that night for Benin. That way I would avoid the traffic hold-up and prevent my engine from overheating. I left immediately and headed for Benin. The journey was to take me through Ibadan. At about 12.30 am, a few yards from my office in Ibadan I was stopped by a patrol team.

“Where are your papers?” a policeman asked. I turned off my engine and opened my car boot. I usually kept the car papers in my briefcase and I thought I had put it in the boot to avoid missing it. It was not there. I had forgotten it in Benin when I washed the car before the trip.

“I can't find it here,” I said apologetically. “I forgot it in Benin.” I was pleading with the policeman and explaining the circumstances of my late night journey when he received orders from his boss. The Inspector just walked up to us and ordered him.

“Stolen vehicle, take him to the station.” The policeman jumped into the front seat of the car with me and ordered me to drive. On the way, he advised I gave him fifty naira. He knew I had not stolen the car. He would let me go if I gave him fifty

naira.

“So with fifty naira you would let a thief go with a stolen car?” I said trying to be patriotic. The policeman took one look at me and ended the discussion. As soon as we arrived in the station, the police ordered the desk sergeant to book me for stealing. I was arrested for stealing my own car. I was exhausted from the journey and thought I would be released soon after stating my case to reasonable Nigerians. I was wrong. My car tyres were deflated, I was stripped to my underwear, and thrown in jail. I was wearing a jean suit, typical of boys fresh from overseas. A rough looking man welcomed me into the cell.

“Oga, wetin you do?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I am accused of stealing my own car.”

“You tief am?”

“No. I even bought the car in Ibadan.”

“You get anything for us?” he asked sympathetically. He was the cell president and was to be obeyed. He was respected by all the policemen. He was the oldest inmate and had been there over two years without trial.

“I get cigar inside the car. Because I nor give the police money when dem catch me,” I said.

He called the desk sergeant and ordered him to get the roll of *Benson & Hedges* cigarettes in my car outside. I usually bought rolls and had two in the car.

“Sleep for that corner. If you wan shit tell me. I go take you go outside.”

The other inmates shared a small corner of the cell. I was a big man, he thought, and he allowed me to stay in an exclusive corner of the cell. I had paid for the space with 10 packets of cigarettes.

The next day, a plain clothes man came to the cell in the afternoon. “Where is the suspected car thief?” he asked. He was holding a file. I stood up to approach him at the cell door.

“I will start your investigation next week when I come from Abeokuta for the weekend.”

The cell president cut in angrily. “Wetin you dey investigate?” He say he buy the car for Ibadan. Telephone the company.” It was an order, and no one disobeyed the president. I gave him my office phone number. The police investigator was sure I was a

crook who just provided a phoney number. Out of curiosity he dialled the number. It was in Ibadan. Within minutes, almost twelve exotic cars besieged the police station. Etteh, Aro, and all the engineers drove into the police station. The General Manager of Incar Motors came immediately, he was contacted by Etteh. He was an Italian, and specially sold the car tyres that I used for my car to me. The Divisional Police Officer was attracted by the influx of cars into the station, and came downstairs to enquire. He ordered my immediate release and investigation into the matter. He was from Okpara, and I was confident I was in safe hands. The desk sergeant was curious and asked me personally.

“Are you really a graduate Engineer? Why did you not convince us?”

“I forgot to bring my certificates to the station,” I retorted angrily.

“But you are too small to buy a car.”

The Divisional Police Officer apologised for the unfortunate incident. It was not the fault of the police. I should have carried my particulars. It was too late to be on the road alone at night. I needed the break, but I did not imagine I would be thrown into jail like a common criminal. The jail president practically saved my life that night. A young boy in the cell cried all night. He was arrested among a mob at night. He stood in front of his house that evening watching the fight. He had been in cell custody for three months. His poor parents could not produce the ten thousand naira required to secure his bail.

“I will ensure speedy investigation into the matter,” the Divisional Police Officer in charge of the station said to me when he discovered I was from Okpara Inland. His family compound was near mine in Okpara. I was to supply the particulars to the vehicle to facilitate the investigations. I left Ibadan that morning for Benin. The company driver took me to Benin and returned with the photocopies of the vehicle particulars and my driving licence.

It took another 3 months before I secured the release of my car. The investigation was concluded with the appearance of the General Manager of Incar Motors, but the police wanted me to settle them. They wanted money, and I was the new patriotic boy on the block. The honest Nigerian. Okpako went to the police station to collect the car. He used the car in school until the holidays.

Thirteen

The Lost Wife

Reti and Dander Singh arrived Nigeria soon after. They had been employed to work in the firm as Structural Engineers. Dander was excited. He loved Nigeria. Reti arrived with his wife and daughter. He was married to a British girl. Onyebuchi and I secured their employment. They were brilliant students back in the University of Surrey.

I worked in Benin for some time. Engr. Akwa was the manager, and was a great fan of Genesis. We spent time together and never considered it as a side business apart from my normal duties in the office. It was part-time and he considered it so. I was determined to settle down. Pennington, Dupsy, Ify, Pedi were women in my life I had thoughts of marrying at one time or the other. I needed to settle down.

I met Nkem at Asame's father's burial ceremony. She was one of the girls who lived in the same street as Asame's father. Asame knew Nkem well. She called him Daddy. Nkem was an Ibo from the eastern part of the country. She was not tall, but was endowed with well-rounded hips and big breasts. She was light-skinned and had good teeth. She was simply a happy girl. As soon as we were introduced, Nkem sat at our table throughout the ceremony. I was dressed like a hippy. I was from England, and that was quite a good credential to attract the girls. Nkem stuck to her new catch. We went home midway into the ceremony and Nkem stayed with me the next week.

Nkem was exceptionally pretty. That made up for her lack of height, and she was adequately compensated by her body statistics. Her legs were straight and she had small feet. When she wore high heels, Nkem was an instant model. Her hair was natural and fell to her shoulders. She had blue eyes and you would think she was an albino. I loved Nkem. She was perfect with

housework. Nkem was a perfect housewife material. When Nkem cooked a meal, I could almost 'taste' her passion and beauty in the food. She would watch me eat and watch out for any signs of disapproval from me. There were never any. I could marry Nkem, but Nkem would not marry me in her dreams, she thought. Nkem was a secondary school dropout. She stopped schooling after her second year in a local secondary school in Benin. She could hardly read and write. How can a Master's degree holder in Engineering marry an illiterate. She was in the relationship for fun. Nkem lived a few blocks from Genesis and usually came around to help out. She was regarded as Oga's wife.

Dander travelled to Benin to spend the weekend with me. He came by road, and I went to the bus station to receive him. Nkem was living with me in the GRA at that time and took good care of Dander. She made salad dishes and cooked fried rice. It was Dander's favourite. Dander wanted me to marry Nkem, and I was considering the proposition. The educational level did not matter to me. I needed a wife now.

Stella was serving out her National Youth Service in Benin. She was teaching in the Girls' College in Warri when I was in the Mid-West College as a teacher. We used to travel in the same taxi home. Felele always told me then she would make a very good wife. Felele had special liking for her then. I never thought of her then as a wife material. Nene was my girl then. Stella came to see Staffy in the house one afternoon. Staffy had gone out to buy drinks.

"Addico, long time no see," Stella shouted with excitement as she entered the living room. She wore a pair of jean trousers and a smart T-shirt. She looked really smart and sexy. You could see her nipples through the shirt. She wore high-heeled shoes, and flung a white scarf round her neck.

"You really look nice today," I said as she settled down. We talked for a long time. She made interesting conversation and our chemistry began to blend. By the time Staffy came back, Stella was already sitting close to me in an unusual manner. Staffy knew at once we were on to something. Maybe he intended it to be so, because he looked pleased with himself. Staffy had a fiancé. She was in the College of Education. Ebieren read mathematics and was easily the most brilliant girl in her class. They were going

to get married. Staffy bought foodstuffs from the market and Stella immediately offered to help with the cooking. Stella was a Yoruba girl and put a lot of spices in her food. Dander liked spices and enjoyed Stella's cooking. She was particular about hygiene when cooking. She practically scrubbed the ingredients before use. She would use a disinfectant if it was safe enough.

Stella served her primary assignment in a commercial bank in town. She studied for a degree in Banking and Finance. The corps members assigned to the bank had quarters secured for them in the GRA, and Stella lived close to us. She could come anytime she wanted. Many times she spent the night with me. I liked her. Why not! I was looking for a wife. Stella could be my wife, I thought. She didn't like going to the night club. She was a reserved lady with high ethics, and wouldn't stay out late. I was a night crawler, and loved dancing. My destination every weekend was a night club. When I had a girl I would attend another night club. Nkem usually patronised Genesis and I wouldn't be comfortable if they met.

I met Franca in a supermarket. She was of a mixed race. Her mother was British and her father a Bini. I had gone to the supermarket to buy my popular brand of cigarettes. *Jasmine* was an expensive brand of cigarettes. It gave out a wonderful aroma, and girls liked the smell. I smoked *Jasmine* when I wanted to show off.

"I like *Jasmine*," Franca said as I got to the counter to pay for my cigarettes.

"Do you smoke?" I asked. I was happy she spoke to me. Who wouldn't? Franca was easily the most beautiful girl I had seen around. She had impeccable white skin and blond hair. You could never pass her for a coloured girl. She wore expensive make-up. She selected the colours, and had white eyes. Franca selected her dresses from magazines. She was a model.

"Only when I am bored," she replied.

"I am Eric," I said confidently. I had got enough signals to strike.

"Franca Osagiede."

"I thought you were an Oyibo." *Oyibo* was the term we used in Pidgin English for white-skinned people.

"Are you bored now?" I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. I could tell she expected me to move on.

“Can I give you a ride home?”

We went to the Plaza for a drink and smoked my packet of *Jasmine*. Franca was like a piece of jewellery. Everyone looked at us as a pair of returnees from Europe. It was a pride walking with Franca. Her slim built and shining pair of straight legs caught anyone’s attention. Her small face could compete with Mona Lisa on canvas. I took Franca to my house in GRA. We had lunch, and I drove her home. She lived in town in her father’s house. Her father was a chief. He had lived in Britain for over thirty years and came home to establish a business. Franca had finished her secondary school education and was preparing to go abroad for her university education. She was a British national. That evening I took her to Genesis. Nkem was out of town and it was safe. Franca loved dancing and we practically stayed on the dance floor until 1 am.

“Let’s go,” she said. “I want to make love to you.” That was the only prop I needed. In no time we were home in each other’s arms. Franca was loved by everyone in my house. She was recommended.

I had a definite problem now. I had three girls and I liked all of them. Franca was a likely choice. She had a future and she was pretty. It was difficult to determine whether she loved me or just liked the dancing and sex. She was not a home person. Her favourite was eating in Chinese restaurants. Stella was rather artificial, I thought. I was an LIG and could not be bothered with her food hygiene. She also liked to show off her status as a banker. I wanted a housewife, not an academician or high profile worker. Nkem was the perfect one for me, but wouldn’t settle down. She never believed I liked her enough for marriage. She knew she couldn’t cope with my circle of friends.

I soon left for Ibadan for a supervision project. It was a delicate project and required my presence. I was checked into a 3-star hotel in the Mokola Hills in Ibadan. The hilltop was the highest point in Ibadan, and you could view the whole of Ibadan from there. I met Jeanette down the hillside as I went to work one day. She was a Cameroonian girl. Jeanette agreed to be my girlfriend. She liked my company. I was an engineer and had a good car. I could take her anywhere she wanted to go. We spent a lot of time

in the Recreation Club, Ibadan. I took her to choice places. She liked coming to my office. I was the chief engineer in a construction site, and she was given special attention by the contractor. It was a French firm and Jeanette spoke French fluently. Jeanette never allowed me to touch her. She had a phobia for Nigerians. She believed every Nigerian was a crook and needed girls for other reasons other than love. She could go with me anywhere, but would never be locked up in a room with me alone. Anytime she visited me in my hotel room, she came with her six-year-old niece. It was for protection against the devouring Nigerian. I wondered why, but soon got used to it. We just had a platonic relationship. She wouldn't go out in the night. It was far too dangerous.

My night club partner was Shanta. Shanta was 18. She was born in Nigeria. Her parents were Indians and had been in Nigeria for over twenty years. They were naturalised Nigerians. I met Shanta in a night club. She came with her mother, and her thirteen-year-old younger sister, Pantí. Her brother, Shawn, was with them and bought the drinks on their table. After the first dance with Shanta, I moved over to their table and took over sponsorship of the evening. We were all drunk. I danced mostly with Pantí. She seemed to really like me and tried many times to hold me close to herself while we danced. She was the only one who was not drunk, and seemed to take advantage of that. She knew the others would not notice her advances. She was too young, I thought.

We all went to my hotel that morning. Their house was at the other end of town and we all agreed it was too late to go to their house. They were welcome in my hotel. I was booked in a suite and the hotel management were under instructions to take good care of me. They were well served. I returned from work to take them home. They were all my friends, and I showed no special interests in having a relationship with any of them. It seemed confusing. The thirteen-year-old wanted me, and the mother thought I could strike it out with her. She was an alcoholic and was just a few years older than me. She had lost her husband about ten years ago and seemed desperate for a relationship. I looked like a good provider. Shawn was the bread winner of the family. He worked menial jobs in an Indian restaurant, and his

wages were barely enough to take care of the family. The mother sometimes worked in a local supermarket. She sorted out fruits and vegetables. It was a temporary job. I took care of Shanta and Panti. I provided their girl needs. They spent most of their time in my hotel during the week. I was always away at the weekends to Benin. I had Genesis to attend to. One day, I met Shanta in Mokola. She had come to collect some fruits from the fruit market for her family. We rushed to the hotel immediately and made love. It seemed she had an urgent need to establish herself as mine in her family. She never wanted the relationship to be known by her family. "They would kill me," she told me. Shawn accompanied me to Benin a few weekends. He wanted to be part of the Genesis team. He sometimes stayed with the disc jockey and took turns selecting music for the Sunday afternoon parties at the club. It would have been difficult relocating an entire family from Ibadan to Benin.

One morning, I was on my way to work. I was running late. I slept in Shanta's house. I was too drunk to drive home, and Shanta insisted I spent the night in their house. We managed well. I rushed to my hotel to freshen up and went to work. At the bottom of the hill on the same spot where I met Jeanette, I saw a light-skinned girl. Her dress revealed her entire back and part of her bottom. It looked enticing. She wore high-heeled shoes and looked tall. She had a small frame and looked sophisticated with her flowered hat. The weather was dull and threatened to rain. I thought I should help a pretty young lady in distress. It would rain soon. She would need a lift. I pulled by her side.

"Where to?" I asked opening the passenger's side door as I stopped. She hopped in.

"Independence Hotel," she said turning her face to me. She looked familiar. She was looking at me rather strangely as if trying to figure out something. Her eyes were fixed on me. Suddenly she touched my hand as if motioning on me to stop the car.

"Eric!" she screamed. I pulled over by the side of the road.

"Esther! You still dey do ashawo?" The words just rolled out. I exclaimed.

The tears rolled freely from her eyes. She sobbed as she told me her amazing story. Esther was my friend in the same Independence Hotel when I was a student in Oyo. She was from

my village and had showered me with gifts and money as a student. My mother liked her and had hoped I would marry her. She never knew she was a prostitute. Now ten years had passed. Why was Esther still a prostitute?

"I marry Urhobo man from Kokori," she said.

"I get six children, four boys and two girls. Obukowho nor let me work. He nor let me rest. Every day nar beat. He go take cutlass pursue me round Lagos. He drive me last month," she was now crying uncontrollably.

My heart sank. Esther was still a pretty woman. Her age was beginning to tell on her, but she still passed as a pretty woman. At least at night. We were usually too drunk to notice the difference at night. I skipped work that day. I took Esther home to her hotel. We talked about the old days. She undressed before me and I could see several whip marks all over her legs and tummy. She had bruises and cut marks all over. She was an advanced victim of wife abuse. Nobody cared. Her husband never stopped calling her a prostitute in her compound. Esther had had a miserable married life.

She was extremely proud of me. Her little pet was now a big man in society. I had a bundle of twenty naira notes in my briefcase. It was the largest denomination of currency at that time. I reached out for it and offered it to Esther. "Migwo," Esther said to me. I tried to hold back the emotions. I visited Esther in her hotel lodge a few times. It couldn't be like old times anymore. We were different now and more mature.

The following weekend was a dramatic one. It was as if the hands of time were turned on me too fast. Thursday was a public holiday. It was for the celebration of a religious festival. Friday was also declared a holiday. I arrived Benin at about 9 pm that day. I was too tired to go out. I drove to Stella's house and she accompanied me home. She spent the night with me and cooked. Nobody knew I was coming. Staffy came from the night club to see my car parked outside. He drove the club bus. The club bus conveyed customers home, especially the vulnerable young girls. We took care of them. In the afternoon, I went to Franca's house to inform her I was in town. She was excited at the prospects of a wild weekend with me. She had just returned from shopping and had some new outfits to display.

I collected Franca early in the evening. We spent time in the Chinese restaurant in town. Franca was stunning that evening. She wore an all red outfit and clutched a white handbag and white shoes. She was in a brilliant mood that evening. She took her overnight clothes and was ready for a weekend out with her lover. As we approached Genesis after dinner at the restaurant, my bouncer rushed to me just outside the entrance to the gate.

“Nkem is at the gate,” he warned. She was helping out with gate fees. Nkem was like a part owner of Genesis. It belonged to her boyfriend. I hadn’t reckoned on meeting Nkem at the gate. She had seen my car in the afternoon in town. I did not tell her I was coming. I usually invited her on Saturday. It was a long weekend holiday and she guessed I would be in town.

“My younger sister is in the club. She came with my mother and they are waiting for me in the club office,” I told Franca.

“I am sorry. Let me take you home. We’ll go out tomorrow I promise.”

“You have to make love to me first,” she said, trying not to reveal the anger at my words. That was the easy part. I took her to the Plaza. There was a small disco there and we danced for about an hour, then went home for the compensation she needed. I dropped her off quite late.

I returned to find a very busy Nkem at the gate.

“Nkem,” she said smiling. “Visitor dey wait for you inside,” she said laughing. I was not expecting a visitor so I just walked into the club and went to the bar to help out with sales. Staffy was in the bar.

“Pedi has been waiting for you since 8 pm. We met her here. She is sitting over there,” Staffy said pointing to a table at the far corner of the hall. There was a girl sitting alone. There were two bottles of beer in front of her. My heart pounded as I approached her. Pedi was my heart-throb in Ibadan. We lived together in Dr Ogunkoya’s house and she had vanished after my delay in giving her enrolment fees. I had no idea where Pedi had been, but I was happy to finally meet her again.

Pedi stood up as soon as she saw me coming. She embraced me and kissed me. It was also a surprise. My bashful girl could kiss in public, I thought. I was excited.

“Where have you been? How are you? Oh, I missed you so

much,” I said in quick succession. I never stopped talking and she never stopped listening. In about thirty minutes I had given her a complete episode of my exciting stay in England. I told her of my baby boy in England, and my white girlfriends. She said nothing. She just listened and drank beer in between stories. She had come specifically to see me in Benin. She actually came from Emevor and planned on spending the weekend holidays with me. She knew I would show up in the night club. I had a definite problem now in my hands, but I did not care anymore. Finally, I had found my lost wife.

I broached the subject with great caution.

“Nkem,” I said smiling at Nkem at the door.

“Abeg, no vex. I get small problem. You know say na only you be my Nkem, na you I love.”

Nkem saw it coming and began to show signs of anger. Nkem actually meant ‘my own’ in the Ibo dialect. We referred to ourselves thus. It meant we were meant for each other. This time, I was not sure whether the name interested her anymore.

“I get visitor from village,” I said, proceeding slowly and convincingly.

“She come because of me. Make I go drop you for house,” I concluded, handing Nkem a bunch of notes. It was supposed to be a bribe. She took the money and just moved towards the car. That was easy, I thought.

We were silent throughout the ride to Nkem’s mother’s house. The family knew me well and they knew Nkem was spending the night at my house.

“Drop me here,” Nkem said breaking the eerie silence. She came down from the car and vanished right in front of my car. I came down to close the door. Nkem lay there under my car by the tyres.

“You must kill me today!” Nkem was screaming loud enough to wake an entire neighbourhood. I was thrown into confusion. Nkem threw a tantrum. It took almost an hour and more than four promises to calm her down. “I must marry you,” I continued to plead with her. A few people were attracted to the scene and helped arrest the ugly situation. Nkem was too angry to continue the relationship. I had mentioned Pedi in one of my stories to her. She knew I missed her then, and was sure she came to collect

me. How right.

The excitement in me ran all over. We drank almost four bottles of beer each. Pedi had become a prolific drunk. She never ceased to amaze me. I saw my small virgin display alcoholism. It was still okay. She would not dance with me, but loved to watch me dance all night. We were good dance partners in the Ibadan days.

I reached out to kiss her as soon as we entered my bedroom. I reached for her breasts but she would not let me. She did not have big breasts before now and I was surprised to see her breasts were now enlarged. I left my clothes on to sleep. I never imagined we would make love that night. She was still a virgin, I thought. Pedi insisted we put out the lights. She would not undress in front of me and she only removed her skirts and underwear. I flopped on the bed, completely exhausted with all the day's drama. Suddenly, she reached for my pants and began to fumble with my sensitive parts. Within minutes she was all over me. She made love like a professional. She liked coming on top of me and engaged my lips always. I was drunk, and never remembered the changes that had taken place in Pedi. We made love all night. She wore a girdle. She explained the beer had given her a big tummy. It was perfect explanation. She drank beer a lot and always preferred the state of partial drunkenness. She never talked much. I had all the stories to tell.

I left Benin for Ibadan without informing Stella. I never bothered to inform Franca, and Nkem was too mad to entertain me. I went to Ibadan with Pedi. She stayed with me for the next six months, and we travelled for weekend trips to Benin together.

We were ordered out of our GRA residence by the successor to Fabulous. He was promoted chief officer in my brother's office and would not wait for the chance to stay in the prestigious Government Reservation Area in Benin. He knew Fabulous would be assigned to another office when he returned. He also knew Fabulous could afford any type of accommodation he desired. He was a night club owner, and we were thought to be wealthy. We moved into the town centre, near the television station. The three-bedroom bungalow was owned by a chartered engineer. He owned a consulting firm and I did some of his projects for him. He was a friend of Etteh Aro & Partners, and had offered me the house. The house was exclusive in an area of high density.

The property had a three-room servants quarters and had gardens and large trees adorning the compound. Engineer Owasota lived there before he moved to his mansion in the GRA. I was the first tenant after him. Our compound was big. It contained our cars and the kombi bus we used for the night club. A number of university students lived with us. They were mostly Staffy's classmates and had been with us from the early days of Genesis. We reserved the Master's bedroom for Fabulous. He was expected soon. I had my own room, and Staffy had a room to himself. The house was unique. We had a large sitting room well ventilated, and a lot of garden space outside. It was GRA in a slum area. It was an ideal place for parties and we held one every month. The night parties usually started at 12 midnight and lasted till 4 am. Many of the invited guests spent the remaining of the night in our house and we usually had a crowd. Most of the young doctors of the teaching hospital were our friends and they were at home with us. There was a generous supply at these parties. We used the servant's quarters as our guest house, and anytime we were full, the spill over occupied the servant's quarters. Qualification for a room depended on who had a female guest. I always had.

Pedi was my constant companion now. I vowed never to let her out of my sight again. I had such a busy schedule shuttling between Ibadan and Benin. Pedi was my constant companion. I introduced her to the hotel staff in Ibadan and she was treated like my wife. She could have whatever she wanted from the hotel. My company paid the bills. We went to night clubs together. I was a happy person and never let anything make me unhappy. Pedi knew this.

We arrived one weekend to meet preparations for a party. It was a huge party. There were the usual boys from the university and many girls. The young doctors swarmed the dance floor and some danced with Pedi. Some called her Madam. They knew I had a serious relationship with her. The next day, Pedi looked moody.

"What is the matter?" I thought she had a hangover. We had many bottles of beer the night before.

"I am pregnant," she told me.

"Okay," I said.

"No, it's not okay," she was saying as Staffy walked in. There

was a visitor asking after me. He wanted to rent the club house for a private party and Staffy wanted me to be a part of the decision. I left Pedi at home and went to the night club to discuss business with Staffy.

“Pedi is pregnant,” I told Staffy.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked with excitement. “Marry her.”

Pedi was lying down when I got back. I sat on the bed and woke her up. She was half asleep and looked tired. She had been feeling sick for a few days now but I passed it for the season.

“I want you to have the baby,” I told her. “I want to marry you.”

“No. I would not have this baby.” She was definite about it. I was a little bit unsettled at this. Had I said the wrong thing? or did I not follow procedure? Pedi seemed agitated.

“Is it not my baby?” I asked, rather surprised at her reaction. Why was she not excited at the prospects of marrying me? I was an eligible bachelor and I expected any girl to jump at a desperate proposal like this. Pedi was not.

“Have I not been with you since?”

“Then keep the pregnancy. We will get married next month,” I pleaded.

“No. I must remove it now. I am not ready,” she continued. Maybe she was not ready for the commitment or just scared. It was the only explanation I could think of.

“Okay,” I said. My marriage proposal had just been turned down, I thought.

“Your doctor friends can do it for me,” Pedi suggested. Staffy was disappointed at the results. He had chosen an appropriate date and looked forward to my settling down.

The next day, we drove to the University Teaching Hospital. Dr Tieri was expecting us. He was at the party, and Staffy contacted him about our proposed visit. Pedi had an abortion. She apologised for her behaviour and explained the proposal was a bit premature. She had other plans she had explained. She was still my lost wife.

I was preparing for our trip to Ibadan and I went to get a few things from the local supermarket a few streets from mine. I barely turned around the corner when I saw a young man in the

middle of the road. He was walking briskly and murmuring to himself. His clothes looked untidy and he held a black nylon bag. He wore a cap. It was a familiar cap. I had been a fan of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. I had the Elvis cap and Beatles boots and round neck T-shirts worn by the Beatles. As I drove closer, it was Goddy. Goddy was talking to himself and was walking right in the middle of the road. I had passed him when I noticed. I could not stop. He may be heading for the Psychiatric Hospital, I thought. It was just a few yards away. He probably was going for treatment. I was right about my assessment the other day in Warri. My heart went out to him. Goddy had not stopped smoking Indian hemp. He even claimed it helped him with his spiritual visions. Was he confirmed mad?

On my way back, I saw Goddy on the same spot. He was talking to a woman who seemed to keep her distance while pointing in the general direction of my house. I passed by, and returned to find the woman he was talking to. She had gone quite a distance, but I was curious to know what took place between them.

"I saw you with that man with a hat," I asked her politely. "What was he asking?"

"He was looking for Parker," she said. "He said he lost his address and only remembered NTA."

"Poor boy. I think he is not alright. I was afraid at first, but he spoke very good English," the woman said. "I really feel sorry for him."

"Thanks." I sped off before she had the chance to interrogate me. Goddy was looking for my house in Benin. He was sure I would house him. I was the only one who would defend his sanity, and vouch for his spirituality. After the failed lunch on my table, I was not in a position to stand by him.

The next month, Staffy announced his intention to get married to Ebieré. Ebieré was rounding up her studies in the College of Education, and Staffy was in his final year in the university. I was his unofficial best man. We went to Ebieré's village to see her parents. It was to be a low-key marriage. Both of them were students. All our friends went to the riverine village at the banks of the River Niger in Delta State. It was a simple and fine ceremony, and in no time Staffy was married. We all lived together.

On Tuesday, we went to church. I stood as witness as both Staffy and Ebieré took their marriage vows. It was a brief ceremony. There were no flower girls or wedding outfits. Mr and Mrs Staffy got married. It was simple and inspiring. I yearned for the opportunity, and hoped it would be Pedi.

My visits to Benin began to be less frequent than before. Pedi was not always in the mood to travel and I seldom left her alone in Ibadan. Sometimes she insisted and stayed behind. I never went back to my old flames. Ebieré was a saint. She became the wife of a family of about 12 adults in the house. Everyone loved her. We were ever entertaining guests, and the local drinks and provisions merchants in the street recorded huge sales. It was difficult to unravel the mystery of the dwellers in our house. There seemed to be no master, wife or children. We had a dog. Buster was a local dog, as vicious as a fierce Rottweiler or Alsatian. No one dared come into the compound, and no one stood by the gate. Our coconut tree bore many fruits and they would lie on the ground. No one dared come near.

Pedi was getting distant from me. She seemed to increase her intake of alcohol. I sometimes talked about Staffy's marriage to Ebieré. She did not accompany us to Ebieré's village. I took her out frequently. She usually loosened up. Once Shanta came with her mother and sister to visit me in the hotel. They knew Pedi and had not seen us for a long while. We ate together in the hotel and went to the night club together. We were in very high spirits. The moon was up, and it was the perfect lover's night. Shanta could not expose her feelings for me. Her culture and mother were obstacles. We sat together and drank. I ordered chicken and *suya*, the roasted meat delicacy from the northern parts of Nigeria. I liked dancing. So did Pedi and Shanta. Pedi was in no mood to dance. It seemed as if we had had a fight. All night, Pedi would not dance with me. Shanta and Panti filled in for her. She just drank. It was getting embarrassing. She just kept on drinking. Shanta made an excuse for their exit. There was a couple from their area. The man sometimes took them out. He was in the club and as soon as he wanted to leave with his date, Shanta left with her family.

"What is wrong?" I kept asking.

"Nothing."

“If you were not in a good mood, you shouldn’t have bothered to come out then.” That was it. Pedi stood up and stormed out of the club. I was amazed. I looked around me to see if others were observing things around me. I gulped what was left of my beer and rushed out to meet Pedi. She was standing by the car. She had her head buried underneath her arms. I was too depressed to say anything to her. I just opened the car and we drove off. She never said a word on the way.

“I don’t like anyone making me unhappy,” I finally announced as we got near the hotel. Pedi hopped out of the car as soon as I stopped. She held the room key. I got into the room to meet Pedi crying.

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Look if you came here to spoil my fun, just go back home. The mid-west line car transport service is in front of the hotel. You know where I keep money.” I had just about had it. I went to bed. Pedi cried almost all night. At least until I fell asleep. I had done absolutely nothing to her and I lost interest trying to find out what was wrong. It was her business, I thought.

I ordered breakfast for two. It was her usual. I reviewed the activities of the week to see what I must have said or done to cause Pedi the pain that resulted in her misery. I did not find one. I hadn’t been with another woman. Had Shanta told Pedi we were going out together? We were not committed to each other. I think I tried to make Pedi happy. Maybe I wasn’t doing enough. Was it the aborted baby?

I got ready to go to work and Pedi was fast asleep. I slipped some money on the side table and stormed out of the room. I was upset, but soon became curious. Something was wrong, I thought. As soon as I got into the office I dropped my bag and headed home to the hotel.

She was gone.

In less than 15 minutes after I left Pedi sleeping, Pedi was gone. I checked the local transport station, and she fitted the description of a young girl who just left with the last taxi. Why did she not wait for us to travel together the next day? It was Thursday, and Pedi knew we were scheduled to leave for Benin the next day.

Staffy was shocked at the mysterious exit of Pedi. She had not come to Benin. I did not know her whereabouts or her address in the village. Whatever the matter was, I was sure I would know.

I returned to Ibadan to meet a letter on my table. It was delivered by DHL and it originated from Warri.

Dear Eric,

I am sorry for all the things that have been happening to us for the past six months. It was not intentional. I have known you for about three years now and know what an exceptional person you have been to me. I just could not keep up with your pace anymore. You have been a wonderful boy to me and I can not bear anymore to see you hurt.

I was terribly afraid to tell you about my past. You seemed so excited about yours and wanted me to know about your exploits in England. At first I thought it did not matter. You had a child for a West Indian and you were happy about it. I cannot put up with my lies anymore.

Eric, please forgive me. I had to go home to my mother in the village on Saturday. It was my daughter's second birthday. Ejiro was two, and her father insisted we throw a party for her. You seemed so happy and expectant. I could not bring myself to telling you the whole story about me.

I know you were disappointed at my physical appearance. I was still a nursing mother and I couldn't let you know. I couldn't agree to marry you until you knew my past. It was your fault. You wouldn't give me the money when I asked you before you went abroad. I loved you with all my heart. The father of my daughter is my father's friend. He was paying my school fees and helping to feed my family and I could not refuse him getting me in the family way. He already has four wives and I cannot marry him. Please forgive me for the pains I have caused you.

Please take good care of yourself. I really liked Nkem. Take care of her.

With love and affection,

Pedi.

NB. I will probably not see you for a while. You would not find me.

Goodbye, Eric.

The tears flowed freely. I was done. All the years. Pedi was

pregnant when I first knew her. She had refused to have sex with me because she was pregnant. She aborted my baby because she couldn't explain a younger brother or sister to Chief. She wanted me to know first about the daughter before accepting to marry me. She did not know how to tell me. She would not undress before me because of her birthmarks. Her breast was now large and flabby. She was ashamed to show me. How naïve I was. How inexperienced could one get? Was I delaying too long before proposing to women? I never realised I was crying. Right in the office!

"Erico, go and have some rest." Aro had been watching me. He was my special friend.

I left for the hotel and just slept through the day. It was the first time I was feeling worthless. It was easy, I thought, for people to make that decision to commit suicide. Pedi had killed me, I thought. But not Erico. Life had to continue.

I made a critical review of my past relationships. They were all lost wives. Was I destined to marry any of those women? Was I the cause of the failed relationships? Was I different?

The next girl I date, I would marry, maybe marry before dating, I thought.

Fourteen

Disc Jockey

“Erico, I think you should have a new car,” Aro said to me as soon as I got to the office. He probably needed to change my mood. I was getting withdrawn. Maybe it was because of my new posting. I was the boss of a construction site. It was a tall building. I was not anticipating a new car at this time, but I was happy at the offer.

“I want to buy a Mercedes,” I told him.

“It costs ₦10,000 in Lagos.”

“That’s a good car,” he said. “Go to the accountant. He will arrange it.”

The accountant arranged the cash for me and I went to Lagos to fetch the car. Asame lived in Lagos with his family. He had joined the Army and was now a major. Major Asame’s friend sold exotic cars at that time. Mercedes Benz cars were rare at that time and there were long queues on waiting lists for the product. I could bypass the process if I offered an extra ₦2000 as bribe. It could take six months, he said. I travelled immediately to Warri. I knew a friend who worked in R.T. Briscoe, an automobile company. They had just received a consignment of Toyota and Volvo cars.

“Wash this one for me,” I said to him, minutes after we said hello. I brought out bundles of naira notes from my briefcase and within 2 hours I was driving a Volvo 244 GLE. It heralded the beginning of new troubles. I was a young graduate, and I drove the most expensive car in the market at that time. I had to be of dubious extraction. The signs were now there.

The evening looked warm and ripe for game. I drove home from the GRA, expecting. Staffy and the boys would be setting up the musical instruments and the drinks in the bar now in Genesis. I needed to catch some rest before the long night. I

stopped as soon as she gave a welcome look.

“Hop in,” I said. It didn’t matter where she was going, I thought. We could end up going my direction.

“How far now?” she said, putting a hand on my thighs. “Where we dey go?”

“I just dey stroll.”

“You make am o. You go show me road,” she said adjusting her seat to get comfortable for whatever I wanted to do with her. She was in her early thirties and wore heavy make up. She was a businesswoman. Young boys were into drug pushing at that time, and I fitted the description. This much.

“Which route you dey run?” she threw in the final bomb.

“I work in Ibadan. I am a civil engineer,” I said, putting the conversation to rest. My mood was over, and I headed for Genesis. She wouldn’t follow me to a night club for game, so she dropped off at the King’s Square, Benin. Game over.

I parked three cars in my bungalow, the least a Japanese sports car, an Italian machine, the exotic Fiat 124 sports car, and a Volvo 244 GLE. There was the Volkswagen Kombi bus we used for the night club. The house was practically ‘littered’ with boys and occasional naked looking girls. Friends came in and out at all hours. The activity level was high. We always called passing children to buy drinks for our entertainments. The place was busy. Apart from the old 504 saloon car owned by a chief at the end of the road, and a commuter bus belonging to a retired policeman nearby, we were the only ones with a fleet of vehicles. The house was usually empty till 4 am when we all returned from Genesis. We slept late in the morning and I sometimes stayed at home when there was no activity in the office. I was the boss in the office where I worked. Our Friday night parties attracted almost all the remaining cars in Benin City. The university lecturers and doctors looked forward to these parties. It was the place for the boys in town. The boys would be dancing all through the night. Some of their cars would be parked overnight and leave well into the morning.

Staffy and I returned one morning at about 5.30 am. Our gate was closed. The dog was nowhere to be found. The gate was tied with a piece of red cloth and two pieces of white and black cloth. There was a pot containing blood and animal

remains. The entire house was smeared with native chalk. There was clearly a fetish festival which took place when we were away. Buster lay at the back of the house. He was tied and was fast asleep when we arrived. He had obviously been drugged. Buster never allowed anyone to even look in the compound. Where was he? We ignored the spectacle, cleaned up and slept for the morning.

I returned home early that day. I was on a project a little outside town. About two blocks away, Mama Kate's little kiosk was unusually busy. She ran a small provisions store in front of her house. It was a family house. Her husband inherited the house from his father. It was our popular store. We got all our supplies there. There were a few cars parked outside. A circle of friends sat around a low stool. There were several bottles of beer on the table. You could tell they had been drinking for sometime now. Their laughter was unusually prolonged and they practically shouted, not talked.

"Little Joe," came a familiar voice. I had passed them a few yards, so I drove home, parked my car and went back to investigate. Whoever it was must have known me in the university.

"Dr Uyi stood there grinning. He had a fully burned cigarette stub between his shaky fingers and clutched a bottle of beer on his chest. Uyi was a seadog. We were in Ahmadu Bello University together. He read pharmacy and was working as a sales representative for a big pharmaceutical company in Lagos. He had moved to Benin a few days back. This was his brother's house. He was a member of Mama Kate's family. Uyi was preparing to move into my street.

"Ahoy Pereno," I hailed him. His piratical name was Pereno. We all had our names. We embraced warmly and I soon settled down with them. I filled the table with drinks. Mama Kate seemed to watch the proceedings with keen interest. Her daughter was eighteen. She had inviting bow legs and had just finished her secondary school education. She ran errands for us. We drank late into the night before I left for business in the night club. Kate became close to me and ran errands for me, mostly supply of drinks. Within days she could come in and go as she wished. Our house became her second home. We showered her with gifts and tips. She liked it with us and her mother would wave desperately

every time I passed by. Friendship at last.

Uyi moved into the neighbourhood the next month. He was addicted to Genesis now. He was a close friend. Ahoy. Uyi told me the story of the fetish festival in our house. The entire street had held a meeting and concluded that I was an armed robber who stole at night and slept all morning. I was not gainfully employed, they thought. They had made the sacrifices in my compound so that I would be caught by the law. It took Uyi to convince them I was a boss of a big engineering company and that I owned a chain of businesses. Their small looking boy was indeed a big man. Kate's mother was the first to learn about me. She spread the word. I became accepted and respected in the neighbourhood at last, and they even attended my parties.

Samiks came from Lagos every weekend just to be in Genesis. There were friends who spent many of their weekends in Genesis. Samiks worked in the commerce ministry and registered Genesis as a business name. Samiks offered to register a consulting firm for me. It was called Kireg Associates. The company had the house address as the head office.

One day, I received a message from military headquarters in Lagos. It was from Col. Wutura. Col Wutura was in charge of projects in the Nigerian Army. He sent a soldier with strict orders to get me in Lagos. I went to Col. Wutura's office. I was expected to be in his office at 7 am. I arrived Col. Wutura's office at 6.50 am. He was in the office, and was told Little Joe was waiting to see him. It was easier to give my name as Little Joe. There would be no mistaken identity.

Col Wutura was unpredictable. He was so in school. He was a man of very few words, but was kind. I waited patiently. I sat in the waiting room. The secretary made sure I was served the current magazines and newspapers. Nobody could predict Wutura's movement so it was better to just wait. Traffic in his office was busy. Army officers trooped there and a good number of contractors came in various colours. He was at the centre of a very important assignment, I thought. I sat for long hours, hungry, tired and becoming angry. Why had this man sent for me and not seen me urgently? Finally at 7 pm, 12 hours after my arrival at the office, exhausted and hungry, the secretary motioned for me to go in.

Wutora was reading a newspaper.

“Sit down, Little Joe,” he said, not even looking up to see if I was the one in front of him. He brought out some drawings from his desk. They had been arranged specially for me.

“Go and design these buildings. Bring the drawings next week unflinchingly.” The meeting lasted only 5 mins.

“Thank you, Sir,” I said. I was happy. It was worth the punishment. Sometimes Wutora liked stretching you to a limit. It was his funny way of testing you. I certainly passed. I had landed my first job as a Consulting Engineer. Kireg Associates had a job.

I was back in Lagos to deliver the drawings personally to Col. Wutora. He was happy, and invited me to his house. I went with Major Asame, and I spent the night in Col. Wutora’s house. We discussed fees due for the job and I left for Ibadan. It was getting close to Christmas and everyone was looking for money for the season. I had no particular needs at that time.

I did not have any leave that year. The contractor was not going for his usual holidays. He was under pressure to deliver his project on time. It was a prestigious one and I was at the centre of the designs and supervision. It was a shopping complex and contained many public facilities. Dr Ogiolo walked into my office. He usually called on his way from the university. The project site was right in front of the university gates. Ogiolo was Fabulous’s classmate. He was my close friend and was a lecturer in the university.

“I will be going with you to Benin for the Christmas holidays. We are breaking up on Thursday.”

“No problem. I am going alone.”

“In that case, you will give my friend’s niece a ride to Benin. She is going to Warri. She is a student.”

“Is she from Warri?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I will marry her,” I told Dr Ogiolo. “She fine? Urhobo girls nar so so strong strong face them dey get o,” I continued.

“She is not bad at all.”

Dr Ogiolo came into the office in the afternoon. I needed to do some work before leaving. I was not going to be in the office for the weekend. I tidied a few matters with the contractor, and

cleared my table. I had packed my belongings, and was ready for the trip. We drove to the university female hostel and Dr Ogiolo went for his friend's niece. For some strange reason I sat in the car in anticipation. I didn't know what to expect, but I was excited.

Ogiolo carried two medium-sized suitcases. Two girls followed closely with the remaining of her stuff. They looked nice. I opened the boot of the car to arrange the suitcases. I could see she was observing me.

"Meet Vugbe, Parley's niece," Ogiolo said, introducing her to me.

"Hi," she said, as I opened the rear passenger's door to let her into the car.

I was going to be the perfect gentleman. This was going to be my wife, I thought. I had been deceived by many girls before now. I would do something different this time, I thought.

I played blues throughout the journey. She seemed to like the selection. Dr Ogiolo and I talked throughout the trip. He was a psychologist, and sometimes seemed to read minds. He brought up interesting subjects for discussion, and kept the trip lively. I was dying for a smoke and a drink. Ogiolo drank beer too, and as soon as we got halfway I pulled into a restaurant.

"Let's eat here," I said. There were numerous hotels along the route, designed for traveller's food and drinks. This was a fine hotel. I knew it well. It was my favourite spot. We soon settled in a table, ordered food and drinks. I lit a *Jasmine* cigarette and gave Dr Ogiolo the packet. Vugbe excused herself. She wanted to use the bathroom. I knew it well and directed her to the place. As she left I turned to Ogiolo.

"I will marry her."

"She is a very good girl," Ogiolo said.

We drove into the night and finally arrived Benin City very late. It was 11 pm when we drove into my compound. The boys had set up for the weekend party. Staffy was in Genesis, but the party lights were on in the house. The boys had arrived and there was serious dancing. The wisest thing to do was to join the party. It was already too late to proceed to Warri. I had not promised to go to Warri. Ogiolo took his things in. He was going to join the party and leave for Delta the next day.

“Leave your stuff in the car,” I told Vugbe. “I will take you to Warri.” I did not want to take advantage of the circumstances to make her sleep in my house. It would have been cheap, I thought.

“I’m going to marry you,” I told her. It was as if I was doing her a favour. She was not supposed to refuse, I thought. She just grinned and said thanks. It seemed like a joke at that time. We spent a few minutes with the boys, had a few drinks and something to chew and set out about midnight for Warri. We arrived Warri very late. I took my time on the way. We talked about the holidays. She promised to attend my Christmas party. She would come specifically to see me in Benin, and spend time with me. This was the proof I required that she wanted me. Her parents were fast asleep when we arrived. They hadn’t expected her to be on the road that late.

“Why are you travelling this late, Vugbe?” her mother said as she opened the gate to let us in. “Thank you, my son, for bringing her home.” I thought she was nice. She looked young for her mother and spoke Queen’s English.

“Goodnight, Mama,” I said as I turned to go away.

“Don’t tell me you are going to Benin this night?” she said. She was definitely against such moves. She would hold herself responsible for anything that would befall her daughter’s kind driver.

“I am going to my mother’s house,” I lied.

“See you in the morning then,” she concluded as I drove off to Benin.

I was not going to lose this one, I thought as I drove to Benin. Vugbe was smart. She attended Government College in another town and was well cultured. Her parents seemed to be of the High Income Group (HIG). I was originally from the Low Income Group, and proud of my parents. We had been provided the same amenities as HIGs. I was a middle-class success. Now I wanted to marry. Thoughts of Pedi and Dupsy filled me with scorn and deep regrets. They had wasted valuable time in my life. At this time, girls looked at me as a wasted old man. My car was bigger than my person, and only the old were attracted to me. The young were sure Madam was at home. The battle raged on. Now I had my own.

My Christmas party was huge, but I was not in circulation.

Vugbe did not come. I was miserable. I refused to hook up with anyone at the party. I just drank and played the host. It was an annual event, and we held it on Christmas eve. It was always well attended. Okpako, my younger brother, had a new girl that evening. She was a student of the polytechnic from the middle belt. She was shy and reserved, and could not spend the night in our house after the party. At about 4.30 am, Okpako decided to take her to her house. He used the Volvo. There were other cars to chose from. Okpako wanted to impress his girlfriend. He was a medical student. He would be a doctor in a few months. He drove away into the night.

Okpako did not return with the car. He fell asleep while driving and hit a security guard returning from work in the early hours of the morning. He was lucky not to have been lynched. The man had not died, but the car was vandalised. The windshield was smashed by the angry mob and it took the intervention of a police patrol car to rescue Okpako. My Volvo was incapacitated.

It was Vugbe's fault, I thought. Why had she not come to my party. University girls were big girls. She was to spend the holidays with me. Vugbe was to go back to school on the 2nd of January. I expected her to spend some time with her parents. My car was damaged, and I made arrangements to use my other Italian machine. I arrived Warri on the 3rd of January to carry her to Ibadan, but she was gone.

"She left yesterday," her mother said.

"Were you the young man who brought her from school?" she asked.

"Yes, Mama."

"She says you work as an engineer in Ibadan," she said. Vugbe had given her my CV. It was pleasing. Maybe she believed me after all. Her husband. I left immediately for Benin.

Goddy's younger brother flagged me down as I left Warri. He was going to Benin to see his father. I was glad to see him so I gave him a ride.

"I am on my way to Ibadan," I told him as he entered.

"Goddy is dead," he announced. It was obvious he was eager to tell me. "He died in Uselu. He was hit by a car in the middle of the road." It seemed like a relief to him. He was glad he ended that way. Goddy had been unstable for over a year now. He was

an embarrassment to his family. Had Goddy died looking for his friend? I was a bit unsettled with the news of Goddy's death. He never stopped his dope habit. Or was it his spiritual exploits?

As soon as I arrived in Ibadan, I drove to the girls' hostel and asked for Vugbe. She had not been seen. I left a message with a friend and went to my hotel to unpack. I returned in the evening and she was not back. I gave up. Perhaps I had lost her, I thought. The next day she showed up. I just went with her to the hostel and she took her things. We drove to the hotel, and Vugbe stayed with me for the remaining part of her school life. I never let her out of my sight again.

The firm had a party for the general manager. It was a send off party and I attended with Vugbe. I introduced Vugbe to my best friends. Etteh and Aro were happy. Aro always wanted me to settle down and he welcomed Vugbe. She was ravishing that night. She dressed like a diplomat's daughter, with respectability written all over her face. She conversed well. She was the right stuff for an Engineer. Aro said so.

Vugbe stayed in the hotel. She had all she wanted from the hotel. Sometimes her friends came to keep her company. I never took her on my trips to Benin. She was in final year and needed to study for her degree exams. I soon requested for a proper house. I had spent a good part of my seven years in the firm in hotels. I wanted to start building a home, so I moved into a house in Ibadan. Vugbe had a chance to be the perfect wife to me. She cooked and kept the little home.

Five months after meeting Vugbe, I asked her to marry me. It was quickly settled. No dates were set. She had to finish her education, and there was the National Youth Service Corps to come. I just knew I was going to marry her. During the first semester holidays we went to Warri together. I took her to my mother.

"Mama, see the girl wen I wan marry," I told her. She did not scream with excitement as I thought. This woman was tired of my failed dreams. How many times had she heard those same words.

"She dey stay Fararun Quarters for Warri. Nar him papa get the house wen dey der." That was all she wanted to hear. A real person with a real address. In less than 48 hours, Mama was

already discussing plans for her son's wedding with Vugbe's parents. I had given her all the information she needed. It seemed she was the one who needed the wife. Soon wedding plans began to form. Vugbe finished her exams and was officially a graduate. She came with me to Benin. She was pregnant and we needed to stay together to continue with our plans for the wedding. The stress and movement had their toll on Vugbe. She lost the pregnancy. We were unhappy, but it did not matter to me. I was not marrying to have children. I was marrying to have a companion, although mothers did not think so. It was not my mother's business and she never bothered. She knew we were independent.

We had an unusual visitor one night. We were preparing to go to bed when the bell rang. I opened the door, and standing in the cold raining day was Vugbe's father. Mr Benoma was a colonial servant in his days. He had served as District Officer and Local Government Councillor. He had strict rules. His daughter had not been married and could have been kidnapped by a boy they knew.

"We were worried. I just wanted to make sure she was safe," as he spotted Vugbe sitting in the sitting room. He just turned and disappeared into the night. The message was clear. In the morning we drove to Warri, and Vugbe officially announced her graduation to her parents. It was the right thing to do.

Vugbe was posted to Sokoto State for the National Youth Service Corps scheme. It was at the end of the country. It would be almost impossible to see her, and had to show proof that she was married to get her transferred to her husband's location. My mother fixed dates for traditional ceremonies and within weeks of her graduation, all was set for the union.

The traditional marriage was elaborate and challenging. It took endurance and understanding to go through with it. There were aspects that challenged intelligence. The things that had to be done for the reasons given bore on selfish and protective needs of the greedy old in the Urhobo tradition. The ceremony was to be rounded off with the excursion of the bride to the groom's house, but it was shelved. That part of the ceremony was postponed until the wedding ceremony was done. Traditionally we were married, but the family would not give their daughter

away that cheaply. I was unhappy. She soon went for the National Youth Service Corps scheme. It was mandatory that she attended the orientation camp before any transfer or change could be effected.

We arrived Kings Cross in the early hours of Saturday morning. Vugbe was excited. We decided to do our wedding shopping in London. Fabulous was doing a postgraduate course and stayed in London. He gave us a treat. We went sightseeing and did extensive shopping for the wedding. Vugbe had an eye for simple and functional clothes, and purchased an elaborate wedding gown. It didn't matter to me. I did not know a good dress. I bought a brown suit, shirts and ties to match. It fitted Ox-Blood and I. I bought a few clothes for Staffy and Ebiere. Vugbe did not like London. It looked like downtown Ikeja, she thought. Fabulous helped with some cash. He was glad to be of service to his brother, and made sure Vugbe got everything she wanted.

Staffy drove the almost 1,500 kilometres to Sokoto alone to get her. She had just finished the orientation and was reassigned to continue with the service year in Bendel State. I prepared to receive my wife. Vugbe was not allowed to live with me. It was forbidden for her to live with me unless she was escorted to my house. We were not fully married. I was not a churchgoer, but had consented to a wedding in December. For the next three months we lived apart. I was scolded anytime I took her home to her Aunt's house after six. They demonstrated discipline with me. It was frustrating and sometimes unnerving, but I lived with my fate.

Fabulous arrived in the evening onboard a Nigerian Airways flight. I was in Lagos. I had gone to collect payment from the Defence Ministry. Col Wutora sent for me. It was about time. Fabulous brought a few essential things for the wedding.

"I am not going to Warri today," I told Fabulous. He was staring at me as if I just committed a crime. I came with my driver to meet him at the airport. Fabulous had very little time to spend. He had a connecting flight to Benin in about 30 minutes, and awaited his baggage from the aircraft.

"You dare not do this stupid thing," Fabulous shouted at me. Everyone turned toward us. "Get on this plane this minute and go to Benin. I'll come with the car."

I didn't want to create a scene at the airport, so I just took the flight ticket from him and strolled to the aircraft. I had reviewed the situation. Why had my wife not been allowed to live with me? If I was not her husband, they could keep her for all I cared. I was angry, bitter and felt belittled by my in-laws. I had decided to back out of the arrangements. I waited for Fabulous to arrive from Lagos.

"We must go and see Vugbe's father, Fabulous ordered as soon as he got home. It was 12.00 midnight. Staffy had not paid any attention to my moods and did not know of my clandestine plans to cancel the wedding. His plans were on.

We arrived at a busy Warri home.

"I was beginning to think there was something wrong," my father-in-law said. It's rather late. You need rest before tomorrow." He was relieved. The disc jockey decided to go on with the wedding after all.

At the banks of the Warri River we sat in the warm afternoon winds and the sweet breeze of fresh water to take our vows. Staffy single-handedly arranged a colourful reception for the wedding. Ox-Blood II was my best man at the wedding. Staffy was too valuable to waste on the table. He took care of business. Staffy was the handy man in every occasion.

We joined Fabulous in London for our honeymoon. Days before our departure to Nigeria, we went shopping. We walked into a furniture showroom. Vugbe liked a particular set of chairs, and I ordered the shop attendant to send them to my address in Benin. I would send the money when they arrived in Nigeria. I bought a set of engineering equipment and drawing boards and had the shop ship them to Benin. Britain trusted Nigeria at that time and it was easy. We were in the Commonwealth.

I constructed a temporary structure in the grounds of our bungalow. It was an extension of the garage. It was made of timber, and I used it as a private office. I engaged the services of a draughtsman and a typist. The typist ran errands and kept the premises clean. My equipment and furniture soon arrived and were delivered to me by the clearing agents. They had been cleared as personal effects. I furnished my office tastefully with the engineering equipment, and adorned our living room with the furniture I imported. Kireg Associates was born.

Fabulous arrived six months later to meet the boys. Vugbe was about the housewife among many bachelors. Ebieri was rounding up her studies by now, and Staffy worked in the University Teaching Hospital as a specialist radiologist. He had moved to his own apartment. It was an extension of our house. We were either there or in ours. Ebieri was living with him with his sister. Two years into the marriage, and tension began to mount. We had no baby. We were the least bothered, but Vugbe's mother showed great concern. Our bedroom practically turned into a mini-shrine. Consultations produced different herbal remedies and concoctions. We slept in a vegetable garden.

"The doctor said I should bring you," she said one day.

"Do whatever you think you have to do to get a baby," I told her. "I did not marry you because I wanted a baby. We can live like this." I was not under any pressure to have a baby. I was too liberal for that. I just loved life.

Dr Bekoli was Fabulous's girlfriend. She was a practical girl and was open as a book. She drank beer and was a typical girl from Warri. We wished Fabulous would someday decide to settle down and wished it would be with Bekoli. Bekoli was also a counsellor. She knew something about psychology too. She told me about anxiety, and young women losing pregnancies whilst attempting to impress their husbands with excessive house-keeping. It was educating, and I began to understand some of our problems. Anxiety, pounding, scrubbing and lifting my buckets of water were eliminated from our house routines. I was cautious.

I moved to our office in Port Harcourt on a project. Engr. Monday Korubo was the manager. He was a young graduate and felt intimidated with older engineers in his territory. He was uncooperative and denied me basic amenities. I began to get uncomfortable. The job was challenging and I worked at a site in the local federal university. I was busy enough to carve out some independence for myself. Whatever I wanted I tried to extract from Aro in Ibadan. He said yes to whatever you asked him. I came home from Port Harcourt one weekend. Vugbe was excited and couldn't wait to express her anxiety over the delay in her monthly cycle. I ignored her story, and made sure I did not show any visible signs of anxiety. I could feel her discomfort at

my attitude, so I told her to see a doctor, if she thought she might be pregnant. How would she know I was excited. I left the house early next morning to get some materials for my work. It was a plan to remove suspicion. As soon as I got out of the house I drove straight to the University Teaching Hospital.

“When she comes to the hospital today, make sure she does not come back without the baby,” I told my doctor friends.

“The doctor said I should get a few things,” she said as she returned a few hours later. “They want to observe me,” she said, excited at the prospects of pregnancy. She was detained for seven months on bed rest. We had to have our first baby.

Fabulous brought many types of equipment from Britain, and established a business. It was complementary to engineering, and we teamed up to run the business. We rented a house in another part of town, and Fabulous moved in. We used part of the house as the office. I had a few projects from my friends who were architects, and I began to divide my time. Korubo became desperate to get me out of Port Harcourt. I obliged him, and soon retired from my beloved firm. I just quit. I told Aro I was leaving. Even ten years gone, I am still considered a staff of the prestigious Etteh Aro & Partners. I was determined to build an office after them.

I visited Vugbe every day at the hospital. We would sit outside and talk about the baby. I was experiencing fatherhood first-hand. I had not been there for Elora’s baby. This was my first baby as far as I was concerned. We were complete bachelors again in the house. Life continued with parties. One morning we woke up to find a note fixed to the windshield of my car. There was slime on the bonnet of the car. Someone had smeared my car with acid, and it damaged the paint in the body.

***WE ARE MEN OF THE UNDERWORLD.
WE GIVE YOU SEVEN DAYS.
STEER CLEAR OF FLORENCE OR
WE ELIMINATE YOU.***

The handwriting was crude. It was written in red ink. I was not keen on taking chances. This was obviously a threat to my life. A friend knew what to do.

The next day, we were headed for Usen. Usen was a village

about 30 minutes drive from Benin. It was noted for powerful medicine men.

“Welcome. You will know the person,” the medicine man said to me as soon as we entered. I hadn’t told him why we came. Maybe my friend had told him, I thought. I was a sceptic.

“Good afternoon, Baba,” I said as we settled to explain the reason for our visit.

“Bring two goats. Black and white. Tie them with red cloth and throw them into the Ovia River. Then come. He was not even looking at us as he spoke. We were the only ones in the room, so it was clear he was talking to us. I was frightened enough not to disobey his orders.

The next day, I carried two medium-sized goats bound by red pieces of cloth and parked by the river. The boatmen below went into frenzy. The river was about forty feet below the deck of the bridge. The goats seemed to plead for mercy. I closed my eyes as I hauled the poor creatures into the flowing stream below. There was a stampede for the goats. They would be rescued, I thought.

Baba was waiting for us. He seemed to know our every move.

“Why you dey sorry for the goat?” he asked laughing. “Take.” Baba handed me a small gourd. It contained a powdery black substance. “Put it in your car. You will talk to the person within seven days.” I was not impressed. Baba seemed to notice my scepticism.

“I know say you nor believe me. Just wait. You go see my visitor just now. Nar me dey make all the medicine wen e dey take make miracle for Benin. E go soon come. Just wait,” he said. He was showing off, I thought. “I like you. You get strong head. I go make gun and cutlass medicine for you. Just bring two pigeon.” I had had enough.

“No, Baba. We dey go,” I said announcing our departure.

Just then a car pulled into the compound. It was an old Peugeot 505 station wagon. The door opened and Bishop Dabola alighted. He looked around him to make sure he had not been spotted. We were already in our car. Bishop Dabola was a powerful man of God. He was highly acclaimed for his healing miracles. He was powerful. He dashed into Baba’s shrine. We looked at each other in utter disbelief. Baba was right. After all we hadn’t paid any money for his services. He didn’t even ask us to come

back to say thank you. He was the power behind the Bishop's miracles.

Word of the acid bath on my car soon spread. Two days later Dayo called. He worked with the local newspaper, and was a crime reporter.

"It must be Dakolo," he ascertained. Dakolo would kill for Florence. He knew Florence. Dakolo was the chairman of the illegal branch of motor parks. He was a known thug. He was dreaded as a possible hitman. Florence was a university undergraduate who was not proud of his association. He vowed to make life miserable for anyone who dared court his beautiful damsel. Mukshasho had used my car to give Florence a lift home one night, and the men of the underworld followed him to my house. He had set up total surveillance on the girl. It was the occasion of his grandmother's burial, and my Volvo had been used to drop off Mukshasho's guests.

I drove to the Lagos street headquarters of Dakolo. I parked the car in front of an old traditional family house. There were bare-chested muscled men at the entrance. They were smoking Indian hemp, and looked stern. I totally ignored them and made my way into the living room. Dakolo was seated with two men. They looked definitely stern. Dakolo was a very small man. You could take him for a ten-year-old malnourished boy wearing a fifty-year-old mask. For some strange reason I was not scared, only angry.

"Dakolo, you pour acid for my car. I nor know who be Florence," I said angrily, "now you don spoil my car." He just sat there amazed at my clear boldness. You would think I was on a suicide mission. Right in the lion's den. Dakolo was smiling. He looked impressed and convinced they hit the wrong target.

"Go. Nobody go fit do you anything. Come tell me. Nor vex, my son." Dakolo stood up and led me to the door. His men hailed. I had many regards for Baba. He said I would be talking to the man who wanted to assassinate me. Perhaps he was the reason for my courage. He must have protected me with charms, I thought. Nobody had ever confronted this thug.

Eddiba woke me up one morning. He was desperate. He needed money from me.

"I need dollars. I want to go for a seminar. The Living Spiritual

Master is coming to Africa. I want to go to Togo.” I was at a loss.

“Which seminar?” I asked.

“Religion of the Holy Spirit,” he said.

“What is Religion of the Holy Spirit?” I asked, a little surprised at his foolishness. My friend was a victim of these false bishops, I thought. After all, every religion claims to be of the Holy Spirit. “Don’t let these white men fool you. They only want your money. What are you travelling to Togo for?” I queried.

Eddiba was not convincing. I did not know Eddiba as a religious person. We were classmates in Olivet High School, and we smoked together. We sometimes drank beer together. Why was he going to a crusade?

“The Living Spiritual Master and Leader is God to us,” he said, eager to end the conversation. He is the Word made flesh, dwelling amongst men,” Eddiba said. Now I was definitely sorry for him. I had read a lot of mystic books and none had claimed to be God. Eddiba was definitely under the spell of some Eastern magician, I thought.

“Sorry, I have no dollars,” I apologised and left.

Vugbe soon came home from the hospital. She was due to give birth to our first baby in about two months, and we started making preparations for the baby’s arrival. My practice had caught on well and I made some money. Fabulous purchased five plots of land in the outskirts of town. He gave me permission to use one of them to build a house. I had planned to build my own house since I started working. Now was the time. I started the project. I was not going to bring up my child in this environment, I thought. I had moved my office from the house. I shared an office with Fabulous. He had resigned his appointment with the federal ministry and worked full-time now at his own practice. A few days to the delivery date, we moved to the Government Reservation Area. I secured a bungalow. It had 4 bedrooms and a large servant’s quarters. There was a large lawn besides the house. Perfect for a growing child, I thought. The house cost quite a fortune. I was ignorant of the going rates in town at that time. I paid ₦5000 per annum. Larger houses cost ₦2000 per annum at that time, but I did not care. I was building a house. The estate agent saw me as a young executive director who could afford any price.

Rukeke was born shortly after. He was a cute bundle. Vugbe had specifically asked not to take the child to the house in town. She was in the hospital when we moved. She liked the house. Mama did not come to help with care for the baby. It was traditional for mothers to help out with first deliveries by their daughters. Mama did not come. Vugbe never needed help. We could manage.

The neighbourhood was serene and comfortable. On Sundays happy families went to church with their children.

“Vugbe, you have to start going to church. My child should dress up like every other child and go to church,” I instructed her. Staffy had been trying to convert me to attend his church. It was run by a powerful woman of God. Staffy always talked of the woman’s gift of vision. He was now an elder of the church. Vugbe was an Anglican. We married in the Anglican Church but I had no religion, and we had made a pact. Religion was not a part of our relationship. I just wanted my son to have a church. Vugbe attended Staffy’s church. Vugbe always came home with tales of the signs and wonders she encountered in the church. The great woman of God always demonstrated the power of God in the church. I preferred my state of non-alignment. I was through with religion. I knew there was reincarnation. What was the point? I had warned Vugbe against trying to convert me. It seemed I was her project.

“I have something important to tell you,” she told me one evening as we watched TV. “I have been afraid to say it ever since. Sister Patricia has been telling me to bring you to church ever since. She saw a vision for me,” she continued, making sure I did not explode. She knew how I felt about religion. “Your mother is a witch. She is a big one. Sister Patricia says she would take our son soon if we don’t protect him,” she said. That was enough material to listen to. My mother came to visit and we made sure she never had a chance to carry the baby. Wherever she sat we sanctified the place with holy water. I wasn’t scared of her, but did all I could to minimise her visits. She was no longer a welcome guest in our house. We gave our maids strict instructions on handing our baby to any unauthorised visitor. My mother was one. If she was a witch and wanted to take me, she was entitled to me, I thought. She had brought me up to date, and I thought it

was too late in the day to kill me. We had been married for three years without a child. Vugbe and her mother had worked hard and consulted almost all the available mediums for a solution. Now that we had a son, it was worth the while taking precautions. One day, I agreed to go with her to see Sister Patricia. We parked the car in the narrow street besides the church building. It looked like a temporary structure. There was a big altar adorned with many candles. They were all lit and illuminated the sparsely furnished church. The place was filled with the scent of incense. It looked like an ashram. We were ushered in quietly and I sat down, quiet, unsure of what to expect. Sister Patricia was praying in her prayer room. Soon she came out and laid her hands on Vugbe.

“Welcome, my child,” she said, and immediately went into a trance. She spun familiarly. Mama usually had that dance routine when she was under her spells. Sister Patricia spun and babbled some holy words and settled in front of me. She laid her hands on me.

“You are in grave danger,” she said in broken sentences. “Someone is after your seat in the office.

“They want to take your position. You were supposed to lose your job next week,” she continued, shaking her head as the Holy Spirit ministered my fate to this woman of God.

“We will fast for 7 days,” was the verdict. “You must come tomorrow with a packet of red candles and olive oil. The work is much. My child, go home, the problem will be solved. God has taken control,” were her parting words to us. I was grateful it was all over. We got up, drove to the house without saying a word to each other. Vugbe felt terribly embarrassed. Was this the woman of God she revered? The indices were clear. I was boss of my office. My employees were a boy I paid ₦150 per month, and a typist I paid ₦75 per month. Who would take my chair in my own office? Vugbe stopped going to that church immediately and reversed to the good old Anglican Church. There was a branch in the GRA.

Staffy was undaunted. He believed in the woman of God. We were unbelievers he concluded. The spiritual current was stirred in me. I wanted to find the true prophet. We found an Alfa in the barracks. He was a powerful parapsychologist. He communicated

with the spirits of the departed and divined for us. I introduced influential friends to him. He usually used white rams for his work. Sometimes he prescribed three rams. It cost only ₦1000 per ram. We were given stones to use in our bath water. I had almost ten stones. I was a customer, every visit gave rise to a new problem. At this time, my sisters were declared witches and we were scared of almost everyone in our family.

Vugbe was expecting our second child. Business was low at that time. Government put an embargo on payment to consultants, and fees were not forthcoming. The house project stalled. I was determined to find a spiritual path to follow, so I constructed my servants' quarters as a small worship centre. It was a room with space for an altar and a washroom. I would meditate in this room when we moved in, I thought.

Staffy fell out with the woman of God, and set up a fellowship with some members of the church. They had uncovered a secret love affair between the woman and the husband of their church member who was excommunicated from the church. She warned and threatened Staffy in his office. I was convinced the church was not a place for me.

Bosby was born in the GRA. He was a bouncing baby boy. It brought joy into our little home, although things were still rough. Our rent was due. I usually paid one year in advance. I had discovered the excessive charge on my rent, and was determined to complete my house in the village at the outskirts of the GRA. It was a five-bedroom bungalow. I had completed the servant's quarters/prayer house. At this time my landlord was a pain in my neck. He came one day and deposited his three daughters in my office. He was furious.

"How do you want me to pay their fees? Take them home and feed them," he was shouting in my office. "Do you know how much one block costs?" I pleaded passionately for time to pay the rent. Every day he sent a reminder.

"Edibba, tell me about that your religion," I said one day to Eddiba. He had opened a shop for his wife and we sat outside the shop. We were drinking.

"Religion of the Holy Spirit," he said. "The Path to Total Awareness."

"Where is your church located?" I asked. I was determined

now to join a religion. I was going to move soon to a new house, and I wanted a new life. I was going to be religious, I thought.

“We don’t have a place of worship,” he said. “You can worship yourself. The best way to pray is to sing ‘HU.’ If you sing ‘HU,’ ask any questions and God will show you the answer.”

Eddiba didn’t seem to know much about his religion and was not able to tell me more. For some strange reason I kept on the pressure. In my search I had embraced a religious group who danced with bells in circles. They dressed like Indian saints and looked holy. I knew some of them who didn’t strike me as holy and I was scared of dressing with funny hair cuts. I was an engineer and would feel odd. God would not require that I thought. Eddiba looked normal. He was like me, and perhaps he was on to something good.

“HU is the Holy and sacred name for God that you can sing to open your heart to the many blessings of God,” Eddiba continued, when he found I was getting interested in his religion.

“I know that song,” I told him. “A friend of mine taught me the song when I was small. I used to sing it.” This seemed to shock Eddiba.

“Do you still remember what the friend looks like?” he inquired. He wanted to know who told me about the HU.

“Just my friend,” I told him. I had sang HU many times when I accompanied Mama to the market as a child. I knew the song, but never linked it with religion. I just liked singing the song. I did nothing about the HU song at this time. It didn’t seem there was substance in Eddiba’s religion, I thought.

Soon I was paid a handsome amount. It was a fee from a project I got from the Petroleum Institute. My uncle was still there as Registrar and had made sure I was patronised. I immediately sent one year’s rent through the estate agent. I had about 4 months left in the year’s rent, and I included three extra months rent. I wrote to the estate agent and gave notice of my intention to move out at the expiration of the three months in lieu of notice. The landlord was furious. He stormed to my office with his accomplices, his three daughters.

“You can’t leave my house,” he warned. “Where will I see another tenant to pay me yearly rents?” It was a strange warning, I thought.

“I am moving to my own house,” I explained, expecting him to congratulate me on my achievement. I had not finished building the house, but had finished the servant’s quarters. With all the humiliation, I was determined to move into the one-room apartment.

The next week, a woman came to the house. She wore a red overall gown and held some pieces of metal artefacts, including a cutlass. She was standing in front of my house and was chanting some strange incantations. Soon after the landlord came and joined her. He was holding a black male goat. In broad daylight, they went straight to the middle of the lawn in the compound and started digging a grave. We watched keenly. Vugbe was visibly shaken. She was frightened. They buried the goat alive in the grave, poured some libations and left the compound without saying a word. It was amusing to me. I was hardly taken by childish play.

The next day, Eddiba came to my office to see me. He was now frequent. We had his religion to discuss. I was showing interest. I narrated the experience. Eddiba was a traditional man and explained the significance to me. I was not to leave his house, he said. Eddiba was in my office when the landlord arrived.

“You think you can prosper from my house and abandon me?” he said. It was more of a threat.

“We solve that kind of problem with the special techniques, called Spiritual Exercises,” Eddiba told me. Give him love. Sing HU and surrender him to the Inner Master,” Eddiba said. “In your imagination, hold his hands and surrender him to God. That is a spiritual exercise,” he said. I was at a loss. I did not understand him and he would not explain further.

“Don’t you have a pastor?” I asked. I wanted to meet the boss.

I will come with them, he promised. Eddiba didn’t seem to know much about his religion. Why was it called Religion of the Holy Spirit, and not Church of the Lord Assumption or the numerous names available to choose from? Was it an Eastern religion? Did they go to secluded caves to meditate? Will just singing HU avert the threat by my landlord?

That night before going to bed. I sang the word HU for a very long time. In a quiet time I imagined my landlord sitting on a chair, then carefully I held his hands, and led him to the Living Spiritual Master. I had seen a photo of the Living Spiritual Master

with Eddiba. He was a white man with a penetrating gaze that looked unusual. I said to him, in my imagination, "This man is my friend. I love him. I want him to be happy. I am moving to my own house now."

I worked full time on my house building. It was ready before the expiration of the three months deadline I had given to the estate agents. There was no electricity yet, but I had connected the house to the water mains. I decided to move.

Vugbe would not move into an uncompleted house. She considered the house uncompleted, no fence, no electricity, and no paint on the walls. I left her in the comfort of the GRA house. I bought a rechargeable lamp, and sprawled on the floor of my house. This was home, in the middle of a bushy environment, but it was home. About two days later, Vugbe came early one morning. I was fast asleep. She took a tour round the house and left. I returned that day from the office to see the entire house filled with our furniture from the old house. Vugbe moved in and we started living in our new house. It was home. I sent the house keys to the agents, which they refused to accept. They said the landlord warned them not to take the keys from me. I was instructed to award a contract for the renovation of the house before giving him his keys. I had renovated the house before moving in. I spent a lot of money, painting the house and changed many doors. He considered me extremely rich and thought he could intimidate me. I sent the keys to the agents by registered mail. A few days later I received a visit from the landlord. He came with the agent and his three daughters.

"You think you can abandon my house like that? You should have employed a night watch to look after the place," he said. "Do not hold me responsible for anything that happens to you in the next seven days."

I laughed out loudly. He was threatening me, and the agent watched in fright. I was unperturbed. After all the sacrifices I made to practically rebuild his house? How ungrateful? They stormed out of the house. I received a cheque for a job I had done. It was after seven days. The landlord was right. God rewarded me in seven days.

|| Fifteen ||

A Priestess & Her Son

The environment was simple. Few houses dotted the landscape, and livestock had equal rights with happy kids kicking orange peels as makeshift footballs. There were vacant plots of land housing wild vegetable greens, and the air smelled like the freshness of banana plantations. There were no gutter smells or the choking smells of car exhausts. Cock crows were the natural alarm for us in the mornings, and the sound of the chirping of birds competed with the rustle of wind in the large coconut tree fronds. It was Oko Village. It was convenient to describe this location as the outskirts of the Government Reservation Area. It was peaceful and had the vegetation of a well-planted low density area. This was our new home, our house, and waking up in the morning was an art. Our next door neighbour was three plots of land away. We were the third developer on the street.

A little girl showed up in front of our door. We had not erected our fence and we were not warned of her approach. She carried a tray of covered dishes on her head. It was food from the oldest landlord on the street. The head of the street made it his duty to welcome new occupants of the street. This was his way. We received the food and presented two bottles of wine to the girl. It was a sign of acceptance and our deepest appreciation for the warm welcome. There was hospitality here, I thought. We were in a community where we existed as friends. Our children were going to grow up here.

Eddiba came to congratulate us on our movement into the new house, and I had a chance to talk to him more about Religion of the Holy Spirit. It looked like an easy religion. I wanted to belong to one of the sects. Eddiba talked about Spiritual Masters. They were human beings like us who had grown spiritually to ultimate states of detachment and love and now wore the

consciousness of God. They at one time in the history of the world redoubled as man and as God. They were each the incarnation of the Word made flesh, each one serving out his time to gather people who were ready to make the journey to the heart of God. They were more than the angels; they were the true messengers of God in form as man. I was ready for this journey to God Eddiba explained or else I wouldn't have sustained my numerous questions about the Religion of the Holy Spirit. All I had to do now was sing HU every day for twenty minutes and God – The Supreme Deity would answer my deepest questions about God, life and love. It was okay by me. I was a good guy. I had done nothing to classify myself as a sinner of no mean comparison, but I didn't consider Eddiba a holy person. He drank beer with me. He did not wear a cassock or long robe and did not speak in tongues. Was this a holy path? I had sang HU when I needed to. I sang it when I was stressed by my landlord. I had sung it a few times. Now I was determined to sing it as night prayers as Eddiba had told me to do. Eddiba promised the head of the church would be coming to see me the next day. I needed to hear from him personally.

Vugbe was not interested in these discussions. They had no substance and looked weird. She would tease me sometimes about them.

"Your Sugmad friend has come," Sugmad is the name for the Supreme Deity in this Religion of the Holy Spirit. It was the least to describe this Being who resided in the Ocean of Love and Mercy its abode. Vugbe was in one of those moods. She was expecting our third child. The stress of moving to a new home was now wearing her down. She came down with fever most times. The cool breeze and fresh air all contributed to her mixed moods.

That Saturday I waited for my 'Sugmad' friends. They were due at 9 am as Eddiba had promised. Religious people kept to time, I thought.

Mr Okobo came to visit in the morning. He drove a Volkswagen beetle car. He was a family friend and parked his car behind mine. He usually came to visit and we would entertain.

"Let me rush to buy some *akara*," I told him. *Akara* was bean cakes, made out of ground beans fried in palm oil. A woman fried *akara* at the end of the street. It would only take 20 minutes

and I did not expect my visitors to come within that period. “I will use your car,” I said. Rukeke was playing in the living room. He was two years old at that time. I decided to take Rukeke along.

Rukeke sat in front of the car. He stood on the seat most of the time. He was a restless kid. I parked in front of the shed and waited for my turn to buy *akara*. I collected change and went back to the car. I settled down to start driving when I noticed an old man struggling with balancing on his rather old bicycle. He just managed to get to the spot where my car was parked and held the door to gain balance. I even thought he had hit my car. The old man put his head inside my car, took a look at where I had kept the change and demanded for money.

“Can you give me that money to buy *akara*?” he was looking at the dashboard where I kept the change. His gaze was riveted on me.

“I don’t have money,” I said, unhappy at his impudence. He paused for a brief moment, and placed his fingers on Rukeke’s cheek with a smile. He gazed back at me. His gaze was piercing. He was definitely scanning my face, I thought. Suddenly he raised his palms and waved me goodbye. He struggled with his bicycle for a while, mounted it and began to ride away. My heart was filled with regrets. Why did I refuse such an old man the right to *akara*? Was he that annoying? He did not know the way to beg for money, I thought. I turned the car and looked at the car rear mirror to take one more look at him. He was not there. The road behind me was straight. He may have stopped somewhere. He definitely could not have vanished into thin air. He was a poor old man, yet he was nowhere to be found. He had somehow disappeared.

Mr Idhoso and Engr. Smada were waiting in my living room as soon as I got home. Eddiba was with them. These were the leaders of the Religion of the Holy Spirit, I thought. Maybe the general overseer. They had to have a name.

“Good evening, Sirs,” I greeted, as I walked into my living room. They were seated.

“Welcome.”

“Hi, Erico,” Mr Idhoso said to me, “Eddiba told us much about you. We are privileged to be in your midst.”

Such courtesy, I thought. Rukeke ran to the bedroom to meet

Vugbe. She was not part of the visit. These were my Sugmad friends. I had hardly settled down when Idhoso started a sermon.

“It’s easy. The Religion of the Holy Spirit is the ultimate religion that guarantees you spiritual freedom in this lifetime. It is the religion of the Light and Sound of God, twin aspects of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has always manifested itself to people of all ages as the Light and as the Sound. Moses saw it in the burning bush. Saul encountered it on his way to Damascus.” I was never a Bible student and did not know the story of Moses or Saul. I just listened.

“You can experience the Sound and Light of God. A simple technique is by singing the sacred and holy name of God, HU, in a long drawn out way like this HUUUUUUUUUUUUUU. Sing it for about 20 minutes and then keep quiet and listen to God. You may experience the Light, or the Sound, or just experience an inner peace and tranquillity.”

“I had done that before. Eddiba also told me about it. I knew about HU as a child. I sang it as a child. A friend of mine taught me in the market in those days,” I said. Engr. Smada sat up on hearing this.

“Can you remember this friend?” he asked as if he knew everyone connected with these things.

“Yes, he had a short crop of beards and looked like an Ibo cattle trader. He always wore a dress like an Hausa man. Sometimes he tied a wrapper like an Urhobo man. He was my good friend and was always with me anytime I wanted something. I have not seen him for over twenty-five years now.”

“God has always dwelled amongst men, wearing the consciousness of man. He has always doubled as man and as God. They are called Spiritual Masters. We sometimes encounter these Spiritual Masters in unusual places. Sometimes a Spiritual Master can come to you as a beggar, just to lift you up in your state of consciousness or to avert any ugly situation that may be an impediment to spiritual growth. They are a blessing to all. Members of this religion recognise these Spiritual Masters. They are universal spiritual guides to all lovers of God. Some recognise them as Guardian Angels.” I just sat there transfixed to my chair and my thoughts.

“I know. I have just seen one,” I said.

“Why did he not introduce himself to me? He just begged me for money to buy akara,” I said, feeling guilty.

Now I was interested. Eddiba had been a poor presenter I thought. Mr. Idhoso sported a small goatee. He seemed to know a lot of esoteric things and before long I knew about Spiritual Guides, the Inner Worlds of God, and the Spiritual Exercises of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. All I needed at this time was just to sing HU, keep an open and loving heart and whatever I wanted to have or know from God was mine. I was an heir-apparent to the throne of God, they told me. I was not a sinner. I was Soul, a spark of God.

Finally, I was vindicated. I knew there was something more to this business of God than the priest craft made out. I was free to have direct knowledge of God. One final question:

“Where do you worship? Is it not a church?” I asked. The answer was unusual.

“God does not require worship. We revere and love God. You don’t worship but love. We express our love for God by singing HU. However, we come together in seminars organised by us to share the knowledge and wisdom of God.” That was enough.

“Where?”

“Our next seminar will be coming up in two weeks time. It will be in Port Harcourt.

“I will attend,” I said.

I had just bought a new car. It was a 505 salon car, and I would take the drive to Port Harcourt to know these people. They looked interesting and made meaning to me, but I did not want to join these mystic groups and start behaving funny. Many of them recommended celibacy and never ate meat. I could not be converted to a grass and bitter-leaf eating mammal. I was still Stanley Parker, the great Warri boy.

Vugbe was amused when she came out of the bedroom. She had been listening to our discussions. Good wife. She had to have an idea what her husband was up to. That night I sang HU for a long time. I was waiting for the flash of a light before my eyes. I expected to hear my name, “*Eric. I am the Lord and God*” or some heavenly trumpet. It didn’t happen. I sang HU every day as specified, and never bothered for the miracles of sound and light anymore. Soon, Vugbe fell ill. She came up with malaria fever. It

must have been the movement to the new house. We hadn't installed mosquito nets. It was not healthy for her pregnancy, and we took her to the hospital. I had no money at that time, but we had to take her there.

Vugbe went into labour. She was not up to term yet. The baby was going to be born premature.

King was born and put into an incubator. He was tiny and was in danger. The doctor came out and almost screamed as if there was an emergency.

"You have to get us oxygen NOW. If the baby does not get oxygen within the hour we would lose him he said, practically begging me to get oxygen. It was 4.30 pm. I would never get to the oxygen depot in town in 30 minutes. There was a trade dispute between the oxygen company and the hospital. They had stopped their credit line with the hospital, and patients purchased theirs with cash. I had none. I was preparing to leave the hospital premises for Warri to ask Mama for money. Mama would have been too excited to give me any amount I asked for. She always supported my children at birth. I was thrown into a state of instant panic.

I sped off from the hospital premises. I began to sing HU. I was practically shouting HU. It was the prayer I now knew. I was used to it. I headed for the gas depot. I was specifically told to avoid the one near the King's Square in Benin. They vowed not to sell gas to the teaching hospital. There was another depot about a mile down. I headed for that one. I arrived at about 5.15 pm. They had just closed, but the attendant asked me to attempt the other no-go depot. They might have closed, he said. He was sympathetic with my story. He was willing to reopen the store to give me gas. Two things prevented this intended gesture. I had no empty cylinder, and they had no gas. In my great hurry, I had forgotten to get a sample cylinder from the hospital authorities. I headed for the no-go area.

There was so much noise in front of the oxygen gas shop, you would think there was a fight. It was 5.35 pm. They talked at each other at the top of their voices and argued.

"I want gas now," I shouted.

There was an instant hush. Everyone looked at each other in amazement. They were 35 minutes past their closing time. They

usually locked the shop at 4.45 pm to take stock and close the shop at 5.00 pm.

"You heard him," a bulky man screamed out the same order. "Give him gas."

It was like a spell. A uniformed technician carried a cylinder out. I went to my car, opened the boot and he dumped the cylinder there. I locked the boot. I was going to dump my vehicle particulars with him if he ever asked for money or just drive away. My baby was in danger, and I did not care what method I used to get the cylinder. They would not dare call me a thief. I was an Engineer. Just then a car stopped in front of me. It was Cardino. Cardino was the last boy of my family of five boys. He was now an accountant. There was a young pretty girl sitting with him in front. She had long hair and did not wear make-up. She looked like a decent girl, well dressed and well mannered.

"I have to pay for this gas now. My baby is in the incubator. Four hundred naira."

"Terrible. I don't have a dime on me," Cardino said, coming out of the car to assess the situation. The technician had gone back, and was preparing a receipt to give to me, the buyer.

"I have money," Cardino's girl said. "I have just collected my salary," she was handing me ₦500 as she spoke. I was too desperate to say thank you, and within minutes I was on my way to the Teaching Hospital to deliver the gas.

Cardino met me in the hospital a few minutes later. He had driven straight to assess the situation and congratulate Vugbe for the delivery.

"Where is your girlfriend," I asked him. "I want to thank her specially for rescuing the situation." Cardino looked at me with some embarrassment.

"I gave the girl a lift twenty yards from where I saw you. I never knew her, and she insisted on dropping a few yards later. She did not tell me her name, and said she was privileged to help."

He said it casually as if it was okay. Why would a girl give a total stranger money? A girl? There was no way to see her again. Was it a coincidence? I thought. Whatever it was, I had experienced a miracle. My boy was saved. He was truly a king. I drove to Warri, and true to type, Mama gave me enough money

to take care of her grandson. Vugbe and King were to stay in the hospital until the baby would be discharged from the incubator. Vugbe was a prolific reader. All through her incarceration in the hospital she had practically read every magazine and novel brought from home to her.

“Give me some of your Sugmad’s books,” she asked one day, as I visited in the hospital. I had a few books. Eddiba was generous with his books, and Idhoso gave me some, and some publications on the Religion of the Holy Spirit. By now I had learnt he was a top member of this group.

The weekend of the seminar came. I informed Vugbe I would be going with my friends. She had enough to get by, so I left. The drive to Port Harcourt was fairly long. I had driven this route before, but I was anxious. I could not wait to be in this ‘church’. It was held at the Hotel Presidential. Were they so rich as to situate their church in a five-star hotel? I had stayed there before and was not aware they accommodated churches. It was a room upstairs, and we paid some token gate fees to get in. I registered and went in. Idhoso and Engr. Smada made for the front seat. They had expected me to come along with them. I was their special guest. I found an empty chair at the edge of the hall, right at the back and settled down. I was going to bolt through the door if anything funny happened.

I looked at the door behind me to survey the situation. A bald headed Lebanese-looking man stood there smiling at me, as if he was expecting me to turn to notice him. He wore a suit. Lebanese men manned the gates at their seminars, I thought. The man waved at me and smiled. His eyes seemed fixed on mine. I settled down. I was waiting for the general overseer to come and give the doctrine. It was not to happen. There was an MC who introduced men, boys and girls, ordinary folks to give talks about what they had come to know about God. They sang songs at intervals. I sat down at the back of the hall from 10 am till 4.30 pm. I was transfixed to my seat. I was filled with love. I just had the substance called love run through my very being. I could not explain. Everyone in the hall was honest. Their smiles were real. There was laughter. There was an openness and joy about the place, you could almost touch it.

The talk about the Universal Spiritual Guide, the Living Spiritual

Guide and Spiritual Leader of this religion interested me. It was difficult for the speaker to explain. The speaker was a student of the University of Port-Harcourt. She tried to explain the meaning of a high state of consciousness, but I understood. The Universal Spiritual Guide and Spiritual Leader of the Religion of the Holy Spirit was God, and the living embodiment was man. It was like two in one. I had been greatly influenced by a film 'Oh God'. Richard Barnes starred in that film. I thought all the while that God could just be living amongst us men in some form of disguise with only a few people knowing. The Universal Spiritual Guide and Spiritual Leader of this religion was God, the Word made Flesh, dwelling amongst men, and only a few people knew this. Members! This was my religion I declared.

There were some materials at the front desk for sale. I bought a picture of the Universal Spiritual Guide, the Living Spiritual Master. This was my new God, not for praise and worship but for companionship. I had issues with him. He was going to be busy. I knew I could look at his photo and talk with him. I was that kind of person. After all he was a person too, living in the United States. I was done with asking questions. I knew what I had to know now. The journey back to Benin was fast. My new spiritual friends talked mostly about upcoming programmes. Seminars were the only gatherings in the religion. They did not have worship services, but here was total freedom. As we drove to Benin, a large weight had been lifted off me. I was free.

I rushed to the hospital the next morning.

"How was your convention?" Vugbe asked. She was happy I was showing interest in a religion. She had read some of the materials I gave her in the hospital. She had even tried singing HU, but she didn't tell me. I was the member of this New Age religion, the Religion of the Holy Spirit.

"I brought a picture of the Universal Spiritual Guide, the Spiritual Master," I told her, handing over a black and white photo I collected at the seminar. "He is the spiritual leader of my new religion."

"I know this man," she said, gazing at his picture.

"This is the man who has been coming to visit me at my bedside. He laid his hands on my tummy when I was having stomach cramps. He is my friend," It had to be a joke. Vugbe was fond of

making jokes with my Sugmad friends. Perhaps this was one. I never argued. I let her keep the picture. Vugbe soon came home with King. With three boys we were done with having children. We were grateful for the rainfall. We had three children in three years. By now we had finished the front fence and had connected electricity, I never failed to sing HU before going to bed. I would mentally ask the Universal Spiritual Master to show me truth.

The night was peaceful and calm. The moon shone and illuminated the compound. I had just arrived from a trip to Warri and was fatigued. I must have fallen asleep when I was singing HU. I felt her hands on my shoulders. I was half asleep. She was persistent. I woke up to find her standing by the window.

"It's true. I heard the sound of rushing wind. I thought there was a storm outside. Every time I sang HU I heard the sound of the storm." She was sweating now with excitement.

"It is true," she said.

"Go back to bed."

I was mildly jealous. Here was I, the one who went to Port Harcourt. The one who had been reading the books. The one interested. Why not me? I queried. I was the one who ought to hear the voice of God, I thought.

"The sound of the rushing wind was the same sound the Apostles heard at Pentecost," I tried to educate her. She was excited. Now she was unstoppable. She had proved the reality of this New Age religion for herself.

I was excited about the teachings of this Religion of the Holy Spirit. It seemed to have answers to my deepest questions. A few weeks later, Engr. Aheynok came to my office. We were scheduled to visit a powerful man of God in Bida. His cousin was expecting us. We were to make the trip in his car. The man of God had visited us from Bida and divined for us in the river. Aheynok had a deep spiritual problem he told me at that time. I had forgotten.

"We must go first thing in the morning," Aheynok said as he settled down. I laughed instead and he felt embarrassed.

"No," I explained. "I am not laughing at you. I have left that circle of operation," I said feeling really happy to give him the solution. Aheynok's wife had been pregnant for over 15 months and had not given birth. It was an obvious problem and we were all part of the solution. We usually helped each other. Aheynok

and I had worked in the same office for some time before we established our individual practices.

“You don’t need to go anywhere anymore,” I told him smiling convincingly.

“Just close your eyes and sing HU, a love song to God. It is a prayer song that offers total protection too. Here is a book that may offer you some insight into it.”

I stretched out a book to him. It was a book written by the Universal Spiritual Guide of the Religion of the Holy Spirit.

“You will learn about HU in the book also. Try it.”

Aheynok left unhappy. I seemed to have abandoned him in his dire need for a solution, but he had some confidence in me. We were good friends. He left for his cousin’s house and informed him of the new solution. Aheynok left that afternoon for Port Harcourt. He showed up in my office the next afternoon from Port Harcourt. He returned the book and asked me for another one. He said he had read the book and wanted to know more about this new religion. I took him to Mr Idhoso’s office, and we talked about the Religion of the Holy Spirit. The next week Aheynok had a baby girl. He explained the word HU to his wife and they mentioned the word several times in desperation. They did not care about these things, and within two hours of that exercise there was the baby. Aheynok signed up for the Religion of the Holy Spirit in a few days. I was unaware at that time that one needed to register to become a member of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. With the HU I considered myself a modern day magician. I practically commanded God, and got whatever I wanted.

“NEPA has taken the light,” Vugbe would exclaim as we went to bed.

“Don’t worry. It would come now,” I would say, singing HU to myself silently, and pow! You see, life was good.

I searched for, and attended all presentations within reach. I was the Religion of the Holy Spirit freak, and was beginning to make my friends uncomfortable. Staffy and I had discussions on religion. I seemed to know much about God. Idhoso was a leader in the Religion of the Holy Spirit. He must have seen and known of my sincerity, and allowed me read some of the study materials they had. In one of the publications, I read an announcement of

an upcoming seminar. It was to take place in the Hague, and the Universal Spiritual Guide and Spiritual Leader was the featured speaker.

“So the Universal Spiritual Guide also attends seminars?” I asked Idhoso.

I purchased tickets for my entire family and my sister-in-law. We were headed for London and Holland. The Universal Spiritual Guide talked on Friday night at the seminar. I sat there in front of him. I had a privileged seat in the front row. As I looked at this man, I knew he was a true messenger of God. This experience transformed me instantly into a lover of God. I could not determine whether he gave a sermon or not. He just talked and a part of me absorbed. On Saturday of the seminar, my family and I signed up for the Religion of the Holy Spirit. At the seminar, I met many Nigerian members who also attended from Nigeria. They were surprised I was not a registered member all this while. I attended most of the seminars and gatherings in Nigeria, and they thought I was an old student of the spiritual teachings of the Light and Sound of God. We returned to Nigeria, determined to put the age-old teachings of the Light and Sound to use, and our lives took a new direction. Our faces were turned to God.

The phone call startled me. It was a local call.

“Guess who’s calling?” the voice said. I had no idea.

“Elora. I am in Benin City with my friends from Jalingo,” the caller said. It was Elora alright. I recognised her West Indian accent. Elora had been in the country for the past five years. She learnt of my wedding and never bothered to contact me. It was too late she thought.

“Won’t you ask for the baby?” she wanted to remind me of the baby she had in Guildford. She had told me she could take care of her child.

“Anyway, he is in the United States with his father.” She was cynical as she said so. She was not interested in seeing me physically. She had proved her point. She traced me to Nigeria. She had fulfilled her lifetime ambition of coming to live in Nigeria. Heaven knew who the victim was.

Elora heard of my three sons. She made her research well. Vugbe wanted a female child. It had been almost three years since King was born. The three boys were a bundle. Vugbe was versatile

with the Spiritual Exercises taught in the Religion of the Holy Spirit. They were creative techniques for manifesting gifts from divine spirit taught in the Religion of the Holy Spirit.

The next year I went to the European seminar with Idhoso. I had told him a lot about how seminars were run by the parent body, and I thought it was important for him to have the experience. It would help him in organising things at home, I thought. Meeting with the Living Spiritual Master was always nourishing. It usually fired one to strive ever for God Realisation. In 1986, I took the resolution. I would be God Realised in this present lifetime.

“I am going to have a girl,” she told me. She was half term. In her contemplation she was handed a chubby baby girl by the Universal Spiritual Guide. Dreams was one of the ways the Universal Spiritual Guide taught us. He is the Dream Master, for most people not awakened, the unexplained friend in their dreams. Everything we wanted to know was shown to us. We had a practical religion.

Keske was born a few weeks to an African seminar in Cote D’Ivoire. The Universal Spiritual Guide Master was coming to speak at this seminar. We had seen him speak before. This was going to be my third time. Vugbe arranged for Keske to meet the Living Spiritual Master. We would be travelling with her. Idhoso was the leader of the Religion of the Holy Spirit, and we made arrangements to travel together by air. Keske was six weeks old but we didn’t care.

We sat a few seats behind the front row. A few minutes before the Living Spiritual Guide was to be announced on stage, Keske started crying and disturbing the peace of an expectant crowd. Vugbe had to take her out. I sat comfortably. I had secured a place to see the Master. Poor Vugbe. She would have to miss the talk and the experience. She stepped outside and stood in the corridor, carrying Keske. Suddenly the Master passed a few inches from where she stood. She almost touched the Master. She met the Master.

Keske was special to us, wise and naughty. She displayed exceptional talents as a baby, but cried a little. She was the baby of the family. My only daughter. We were grateful for her gift. She was a demonstration of the Master’s love for us.

The African seminar organised by the Religion of the Holy Spirit was a love gathering of all members of the religion in Africa. It attracted people from all over the world. When the Living Spiritual Guide attended, it was huge. When he spoke, it was a message for all the universes of God. Members knew this and would do whatever it took to be there. It was our secret. He has always existed as the Word made flesh, dwelling amongst men, and being in his presence during seminars was a pilgrimage. I knew all of this even as a child. I had seen him in various forms and it was the knowingness that attracted me to the Religion of the Holy Spirit.

Nigeria was selected to host the African seminar for three years, to prepare for the appearance of the Universal Spiritual Guide. It was a huge privilege. Idhoso was in charge of the Nigerian chapter of the Religion of the Holy Spirit, and I worked in the team that organised the seminars. Vugbe was very understanding and patient. It took a lot of my time, and she took care of the home front.

The Universal Spiritual Guide sat on a swivel chair at the National Theatre, Iganmu, and history was made. There were over 10,000 attendees from all over the world. Etakim was our driver at this time. He had been driving us to seminars before and most times stayed back in the car. He never bothered to enter the hall. This time he did. He must have wondered what all the hype about the seminar was.

“Oga, that nor be person. Nar spirit. I just dey see plenty light and smoke wen e dey talk. I hear, but I nor see am. Only light.” He was fortunate, I thought.

That year I was elevated to a position of leadership in the Religion of the Holy Spirit, and attended the worldwide seminar at the headquarters in the United States. Idhoso nominated me for training at the seminar. I was privileged to work at the backstage. The Living Spiritual Guide shook hands with me. It was my day of glory. As he spoke, I thought about Mama. The Priestess’s son was now a priest, serving with the Spiritual Master she couldn’t see on the way from Ogbe-Ijaw market

❧ Sixteen ❧

It All Adds Up

There was a stillness outside that reflected the season. It was the rainy season. A gentle wind rustled the leaves at the back of the house, and the sweet melody of rushing wind filled the air. It was a sound we were familiar with and enjoyed the physical manifestation of this wonderful Voice of God. It was the replica of the experience that stimulated Vugbe into diving headlong into the teachings of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. The electricity company had put out the lights and the mild heat awoke us. It was a good opportunity to do the Spiritual Exercises. It was the way we prayed, that was most rewarding for us. I could practically get whatever I wanted without reeling out a long list of demands to God. Thank God I was a member of this special religion (Religion of The Light and Sound of God). It was the greatest miracle that ever happened to me.

I reflected on my journey so far. I considered myself extremely fortunate to have discovered the religion and it was a great fortune to be a member of this religion. It was not an orthodox religion. It was more of a way of life, where each person was responsible for his actions, and was guided by an Inner Spiritual Guide. I was to discover that the Holy Spirit chose you, and not by your understanding or conviction of the religion. How on earth did the Holy Spirit choose me? I had not been a religious person. I never sought God to solve problems. I had no problems. You can consider my life a problem-free one, just existing on the fringes of grace. I was a different person now. As I looked back at the events of my life I began to see the connecting diamonds.

My childhood friend in the market became my favourite Spiritual Guide. When I later saw a photo drawing of him at a seminar gathering, I purchased the photo. He is Rebazar Tarzs, regarded as the torchbearer of the Religion of the Holy Spirit,

working under the Universal Spiritual Guide who is the leader of all Spiritual Masters in all the universes of God. He was the spiritual teacher of many Spiritual Masters and is said to be over five hundred years old. Rebazar Tarzs lives in the Hindu Kush Mountains and appears to many as he helps the current Universal Spiritual Guide. He was the old man who asked me for money to buy *akara*. I must have apologised several times for failing the test, but it was not about passing tests, but love.

I knew a young lady who had been helped by Rebazar Tarzs. Kpene always came to my office in the mornings to see my secretary who was a neighbour where she lived. Most times, I would be with members of the Religion of the Holy Spirit, discussing spiritual events and the wonderful ways of the Holy Spirit. One day, Kpene approached me and asked if I could help her with a serious problem in her life. She said she was from the water and always had serious health problems. She spent the greater part of each year in the hospital and she thought she had ruined her parent's life with this condition. She actually thought I was in a position to help. Had she seen me as a pastor? I told her she could ask for help from my spiritual guide. I gave her a photo of my spiritual guide and told her she could contact him after singing HU (pronounced hue), a love song to God, for about 20 minutes. She believed me and did not question how her age-old problem could be washed away just by repeating a 'mere' word. I had done my part, and never really thought much about it. Kpene came about three weeks later with a request to be taken to the spiritual head of my church. She needed personal deliverance by a man of God. I was too simple a man to have a spiritual remedy for her problem. After a lot of persuasion, I took her to Mr Idhoso's office.

"It's very simple," Mr Idhoso said with a simple smile. "Just sing HU and ask the Inner Master for help," he told her, almost dismissing her predicament as a non-issue. Kpene left looking rather unhappy. She imagined my church 'overseer' did not possess the power to deliver 'Ogbanjes', a local parlance for people who had claims of dual citizenship of the water world and life on earth here. I spent some time convincing her that HU was all she needed to solve her problem herself.

I came to the office one day a few weeks later to meet a very

excited secretary of mine.

“What did you tell Kpene to do? She waited for you the whole day yesterday to tell you. Please tell me also. I want to do what she did,” my secretary said. I was not too sure I understood what had happened, and waited for Kpene to come. She promised she was coming that day. The next day, I met a crowd gathered around my secretary’s table when I walked into the office. My female engineer was a born again Christian and was delivering a lecture on the end times and the signs. Kpene she had said was an example of the demonic manifestations of the end times. I later learnt Kpene had said some uncomplimentary words to her, declaring that she preferred this devil that she had encountered to the saviour who had not listened to her all this time. My presence dispersed the crowd.

“Come into my office,” I said as I entered my office. “I heard you had an experience when you sang HU,” I said, congratulating her.

“Uncle, I saw him,” she said with excitement. “My river husband. As soon as I started singing HU, my friend came and separated us,” was the beginning of a two-hour story Kpene told me. It contained great and exciting experiences with the Spiritual Master, Rebazar Tarzs. I listened with some envy. This girl could talk to Rebazar Tarzs anytime she wanted and even scolded Rebazar Tarzs anytime he delayed ‘appearing’ to her. She was sure she was not dreaming. I did not have such vivid experiences myself. Though I was a member of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. She was not the least bit interested in joining the religion. All she knew was that she had a personal friend summoned with a few HU chants, who took her out wherever she wanted to go. I sometimes told her stories about the Temples of Golden Wisdom, and she would come the following day with the full description of these buildings and places. She solved all her problems with his help. He took her to his house one day.

“My friend lives in a small hut in the mountains,” she told me one day. “He loves drinking milk. He gave me milk to drink yesterday.” It was that easy for Kpene. Kpene never became a member of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. Two years later when I saw her I asked about her friend.

“I haven’t seen him for a while now,” she said. I don’t have

problems anymore. I am now in the choir in church. Occasionally when I want something, I sing HU and he comes. He still comes when I call him. I am now born again.” How lucky can they get?

I survived my primary days because of the protection from the Spiritual Masters, spiritual mentors who gave me guidance and ensured I never got caught up in the waves of negativity. I must have taken HU for granted. I did not read about the word in books written on the Religion of the Holy Spirit. I was taught by my childhood friend. It was the reason I escaped being given the tribal marks on my brother’s face today. My spiritual guide at that time had advised me not to go to the market after school. I realised now I had never been alone, my spiritual guide had been the unseen hand behind every experience I had been through. I now recognised Him as the Universal Spiritual Guide, the Living Spiritual Master. The escape on the way to Warri during the war was not lucky. It was stage-managed. I sang an Urhobo song like an expert. As I write today I am not too sure I can reproduce the song. I didn’t eventually run away to England. I would probably not have been the person I am today. Papa was not in Lagos the day I ran into him. He did not see me off to the train station to board the train when I was going to Ahmadu Bello University. Papa could not remember doing it when I asked him what he was doing in Lagos at that time. It was a Spiritual Master.

The Lebanese-looking man at the gates of the first seminar of the Religion of the Holy Spirit I attended in Port Harcourt was a Spiritual Master called Yaubl Saccabi. He was the Spiritual Master among the Mycenaeans (invaders of Greece between 2000-1700BC).

I’ve had a problem with generosity in this lifetime. I thought I inherited it from my mother. Anytime I have something I need to use, someone who says he needs it more would approach, and I would give it away. It has always made me uncomfortable. I would give out my last money, only to get frustrated trying to borrow. I have also never been lucky with the police. I get arrested and unnecessarily detained or punished the minute my vehicle particulars expire. Policemen have an instant dislike for me, it seemed. In a dream, I was taken to a lifetime in the 18th century. In that lifetime, I was a boy thief, and spent the entire lifetime picking pockets and breaking into people’s homes. My favourite

escape channel was the chimney. I was constantly chased by the police. In this lifetime, my generosity is actually the repayment for the same people I had stolen from in that lifetime. This understanding has healed my discomfort, and I am friendly with the police now. Sometimes I blow out, and with full understanding I stand up to pay an inevitable debt. It must be the only reason I spent a night in cell in Ibadan for ‘stealing’ my own car. Many people would dismiss such experiences as mere dreams. Dreams are real life experiences, and I have come to know that you can get relevant information for your present living from dreams. It has become my source of knowledge. Through dreams and Out-of-Body-Experience (the expansion of consciousness) I have been able to prove the fact of reincarnation to myself. It forms part of the teachings of the Religion of the Holy Spirit.

The girl Cardino gave a lift. It was strange for a young girl to let go her salary to a total stranger. It was divine intervention. The Spiritual Masters act strangely. The little orange seller at Onitsha market. He gave me a divine warning. I recognise this now as the Golden Tongued Wisdom – a unique message from God given through another person or action.

The heartbreaks, disappointments and the eventual meeting with Vugbe had all been destined. It’s a convenient word to use here for divine intervention. The bonding with Vugbe did not need research. It was time to come together again and learn from each other how to give and receive divine love, and we have done this for 32 years now.

At every rite of passage, the Spiritual Masters were there. A Spiritual Master had prevented me from doing drugs in the primary school. Goddy was not so lucky. All my life, I had been protected and guided by the unseen hand of Divine Spirit. All the time, the Universal Spiritual Guide was the unseen hand. It all adds up. Working with the Universal Spiritual Guide, the Living Spiritual Master, and Spiritual Leader of the Religion of the Holy Spirit has been of great benefit to me. As my spiritual guide, he guides me and shows the way around blocks capable of bringing embarrassment to me, and stumbling on the way back home to God. Perhaps the greatest benefit I derive from the Universal Spiritual Master is total protection. My least problem now was

relating to the village people and the infamous tales of witchcraft and the general fear of elders and village people. My boldness has elicited comments from my family members. I was seen as one with exceptional capabilities, not to be toyed with. I get what I need for my own unfoldment. Not by faith or belief. The Universal Spiritual Guide gives me when I ask for anything. I get answers to my deepest questions.

Total awareness is a state of consciousness members of this religion possess. I have had to prove everything I hold as knowledge today. I had to ask the Inner Master and Guide about hellfire, Armageddon and the saviour to be sure I was on the right path. In a dream (much more than a conventional dream) I was in a large field with many people, it looked like everyone on earth was gathered and waiting to meet some dignitary. I later learnt it was the Lord coming. I wasn't part of the crowd, so I stayed in a little corner, minding my own business and working on a small table project, using a saw and nails. Suddenly the 'Lord' appeared. Dressed in a white flowing robe and holding a staff, he could pass for some kind of spiritual guru. Everyone scampered into a large cathedral a few metres away, except me. It was a vast cathedral, almost endless. I wondered what was going on. Suddenly four muscled men ran out of the cathedral towards me.

"The Lord wants to see you," they said with a slight bow. They must have been told to show some respect, it seemed.

"Follow us," they ordered.

The guru beckoned on me at the door to come and meet him at the podium. It was a long aisle, almost a mile long and everyone turned to look back at me as I approached him. He stepped forward with arms stretched with a slight bow of welcome to everyone's amazement.

"This man will lead you to God. If you follow him. He is the way. I didn't say I would save you," he said, as he stood by my side. He was appealing to the people to let him experience his own worlds.

I woke up from the experience a happy man. I had petitioned God directly to confirm the position of a saviour God to me. I wanted to be sure I would not be caught up in misjudgement on the fateful and much publicised Armageddon. This was my answer. I was my own saviour. I was responsible for paving my

own way to heaven. My spiritual guide had the responsibility of showing me the way, and not walking it for me. I was now bold, and explored other doctrines I had absorbed. There is no hellfire, no forgiveness of sins, no enemies, and no devil. Only love. The burning love of God, sustaining all life. I was free. I stood at the open vault to the wisdom and treasures of heaven. Just by singing HU. The word HU is the sound of the Holy Spirit as it descends from the heart of God sustaining everything in the worlds of God. It is the creative sound of God, and when reproduced as a love song to God, sustains us, and opens our hearts to the many gifts and blessings of the Supreme Deity.

As I looked back at my over 58 years of existence, it was now clear to me that the Inner Master had orchestrated every misadventure in my life and made sure I escaped the dangers. I had been preserved till this day. As gratitude swelled through my heart, I took the silent resolve to give all of myself to Divine Spirit. I was going to work for God. I had a lot to be grateful to the teachings of the Religion of the Holy Spirit for. Spiritual freedom, total lack of fear, wisdom, knowledge, control of every department of my life, self-responsibility, experiencing only the things I needed to experience and not depending on others were worth sacrificing my whole beingness to the Holy Spirit for. And I was grateful to Mama for being the vehicle for my manifestation in this lifetime. She had done well. Mama had some inner experiences of her own. Those rather embarrassing gibbering at night were communications between her and her unseen gods. It was valid. She had had predictions and revelations concerning her children which had altered in some ways the experiences we went through in our lives. For some strange reasons now I was grateful to her. Mama had now become a Christian although not all her children gave her credit for her new life. I did. I thought she had courage. She had recorded success. The native woman, now a successful business entrepreneur with seven university graduates to her credit. I was grateful.

Mama had been in my house for about 18 months. She was overweight and very ill. We managed her as much as we could. The nanny was very helpful and served Mama with all her meals in the guests' quarters. I had built the apartment specifically for my prayer sessions, but no longer needed it. I was now a member

of the Religion of the Holy Spirit. Mama became a Christian for the later part of her old age. She attended the Anglican Church. It was made clear to her by some of her children she would not get a burial unless she became a Christian. She seemed conscripted into the church. My famous priestess was now lying on the floor from the fall. She remembered my visits from Rebazar Tarzs on our way from the markets in Warri. She remembered the HU songs I used to sing, and it was no surprise she sang HU whenever she was alone. Omote would leave the room and stay with us in the living room when Mama started singing HU. She did not understand what she was doing.

As my mother laid on the floor, her ninety-five-year-old frame wrapped in the bed sheet, my heart reached out to her. I was not sure if it was pity or pain, but it was borne out of gratitude and a feeling I was not doing enough for this woman who had given me all I now possessed. Omote had come to inform us Mama was on the floor. She liked doing it for her attention, she said. Mama had been ill for a long time and she was brought to Benin in my care. My sisters could no longer cope with caring for her in Warri. Omote was a good nanny we had hired specifically to care for her. We had rushed to the room where she lay.

“Mama, doh,” I greeted. Omote was standing by, reviewing the situation. She had met Mama on the floor many times before. Mama weighed over 120 kilograms and she was never able to lift her up herself.

“Mama, you fall from bed?” I asked.

“Yes. When I fall from the bed, my friend go come carry me back for bed,” she said.

“Who be your friend?” I asked.

“Nar the Hausa Oyibo man,” Mama said. Omote was frightened in some way. She complained Mama sometimes seemed to have unseen company. She played with unseen friends and felt happy anytime they were around. The Spiritual Guides and Masters were with Mama, I thought.

“You dey remember dey sing HU?” I asked Mama.

Mama lay there helpless. It was a bad fall and she had twisted her legs as she rolled down from the bed. They were fractured. We lifted her up and took her to hospital, Mama stayed in hospital for over 6 weeks. She was not healing and was in pain. Mama

had lived a good life. She achieved a lot and had investments. With five boys and two girls to look up to in her old age, she was faced with warring children. They disagreed on hierarchy and rights to inheritance. They showed dislike and disrespect for each other. Mama's last days were unhappy, I thought.

We attended worship service in Benin, and on the way home we decided to call on Mama to see how she was faring in hospital. My younger sister was in hospital with her. She was Mama's favourite. She always treated her specially. She was visibly disturbed. Mama had been restless that day and it did not look too good.

Vugbe and I stood by her bedside. Mama seemed to be happy we had come. I held her hands.

"Mama let us sing HU together," I said to her. She was looking at us with an attempted smile forcing her face to lighten a bit from the pains she felt. We sang HU for about 6 minutes.

"Mama, it's okay. Don't bother about us your children. We will take care of ourselves. Don't let us stop you. If you want to go you can. Your friend will lead you on."

Her face lit up suddenly, and she seemed to need rest, so we left.

As I parked the car at home a few minutes later, the phone rang.

Mama was dead.

The End.



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This debut literature relives the typical lifestyle of a Warri Boy, the typical escapades of a young man going through life with the influence of peer groups, and an ultimate transformation through experiences of self-discovery and a deepening relationship with God.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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